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The Third Way of COIN: Defeating the Taliban in Sangin



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The history of counterinsurgency in Sangin district offers a wealth of insights into the nature of the war in Afghanistan and the path that coalition forces should now follow. From 2006 to 2011, coalition forces took three distinct approaches to counterinsurgency in Sangin. The first two—the enemy-centric approach and the population-centric approach—failed to suppress the insurgents. The enemy-centric approach failed because it did not provide the population with adequate governance or deprive the insurgents of access to the population. The population-centric approach failed because the enemy’s persistent military strength impeded governance and discouraged popular support for the government. Coalition forces adhered to the enemy-centric and population-centric approaches for four and a half years, from the beginning of 2006 to the summer of 2010, during which time they sustained one hundred fatalities and many times that number in wounded.

In the fall of 2010, the 3rd Battalion of the 5th U.S. Marine Regiment arrived in Sangin and began a counterinsurgency campaign that combined elements of the enemy-centric and population-centric approaches, emblematic of a shift in many Afghan districts that accompanied the arrival of General David Petraeus as ISAF commander. The Marines conducted enemy-centric security operations in unpopulated areas, to disrupt and destroy enemy forces, and population-centric security operations in populous areas, to obstruct the insurgent shadow government and allow the government to supplant it. Small-unit leaders received great latitude in selecting and implementing the mix of enemy-centric and population-centric methods, and success depended heavily on their leadership capabilities, earning this hybrid approach the moniker of leader-centric COIN. With roughly the same number of troops as the forces they had replaced, the Marines gained control over the entire operational area in a period of three months and largely suppressed the insurgency by the time their seven-month tour ended. During this time, they also captured or killed a substantial number of high-value individuals who had eluded special operations forces. Whereas population-centric COIN advocates had argued that



reconciliation and mobilization of the population required political outreach and economic development rather than the use of force, 3/5 made much greater advances than its predecessors in reconciliation and population mobilization by virtue of greater reliance on force. This battalion and its attached units took casualties at a rate more than twice as high as most of the preceding

units, sustaining a total of twenty-nine killed-in-action and two hundred wounded, but the high short-term costs resulted in a future with much lower casualties, which, along with the bolstering of Afghan capacity, greatly improved the prospects for ultimate transition to Afghan control.

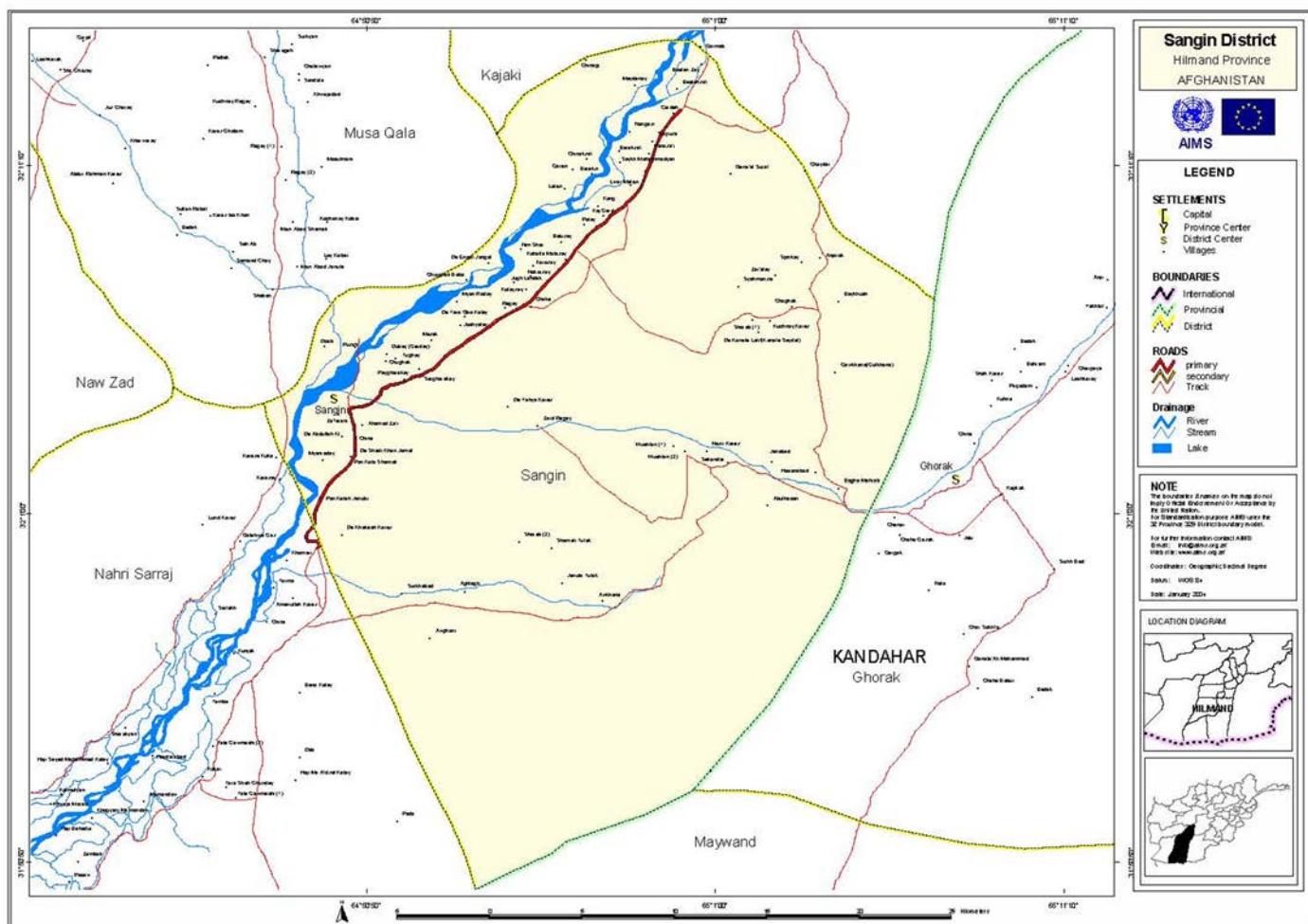
Several additional factors contributed to the success of 3/5 in Sangin. Committed and effective U.S. leadership, at several levels, ensured that the Marines persisted and maintained their spirits in the face of adversity that had caused other units to retrench. The talents of the Afghan district governor and provincial governor proved invaluable in reconciliation negotiations and in management of the competing interests of the district's tribes and families. When American or Afghan leadership was found deficient, commanders at higher echelons took action to replace the underperforming individual. 3/5 demonstrated effective partnering practices, integrating Afghan troops into all their operations while retaining leadership of those operations as necessary, and the battalion assigned its own personnel as full-time advisers to Afghan forces. The Marines discontinued the practice of dispensing development aid liberally in the hope of

earning popular gratitude, and instead made the aid contingent on support from the population, while warning that support for the insurgents would bring only violence to their villages. Operating across the entire district, they visited all development projects to monitor progress firsthand, and inspected all sites of civilian casualty and property damage claims to verify their accuracy.

The principles and methods of leader-centric COIN that were employed in Sangin have broad applicability across Afghanistan, and in fact would be easier to implement in most of Afghanistan's other districts because popular support for the insurgents was exceptionally strong in Sangin. General David Petraeus has encouraged units across Afghanistan to adopt many of these principles and methods, including in particular the need to combine population-centric and enemy-centric operations, but some commanders have not paid due heed. At a time when the United States and other foreign nations are undertaking major troop reductions, these principles and methods can provide the rapid security improvements required to ensure the success of transition. While the number of American troops in Afghanistan will soon begin to decline, the Afghan National Security Forces and local security forces are growing, and they can be partnered in greater numbers with U.S. forces that undertake this aggressive approach. The alternative of concentrating military forces on big bases and restricting their activities in the name of counterterrorism would reduce short-term casualties but would relinquish to the insurgents large areas that have been secured at considerable cost in American and Afghan lives, increase the probability of a successful terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland in the near term, and increase the probability of a Taliban conquest of Afghanistan in the long term.

The ultimate sustainability of the counterinsurgency approach recommended in this report—and of most anything spearheaded by foreigners in Afghanistan—will come down to the quality of Afghan leadership that is in place in the coming years, particularly at the local level. As foreign troops draw down, Afghanistan's military commanders, police chiefs, and governors will take charge of counterinsurgency operations, and it is they who will stand between a stable Afghanistan and a return of the Taliban. They will succeed if they possess the requisite

leadership attributes, experience levels, and comprehension of COIN principles and methods that work. While we can afford the coming cuts to Afghanistan’s economic and social development programs, we cannot afford to cut the human capital development that the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan and other entities are now conducting. Attaining the necessary leadership quality across Afghanistan will also require major personnel changes that can only be secured through the cooperation of President Karzai. Restoring good relations with President Karzai therefore deserves a place at the top of the priority list of the incoming ISAF and U.S. leadership.

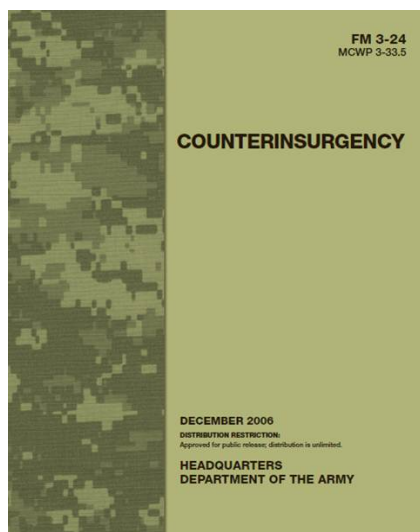


Introduction: Three COINs in the Fountain

Most counterinsurgency theorists fall into one of two schools of thought, the enemy-centric school and the population-centric school.¹ According to the proponents of enemy-centric counterinsurgency, aggressive military action against insurgent fighters is the key to defeating insurgent movements. The theorists contend that military force will not only grind down the enemy's will and capabilities, but will also discourage the population from supporting the insurgents. Enemy-centrists favor few restrictions on the use of force, and view non-military instruments of power as largely ineffectual in the counterinsurgency environment.

Population-centric counterinsurgency holds that the key to defeating insurgency is building the government's legitimacy through non-military activities that alleviate the population's social, political, and economic grievances. It recognizes the need to use force, but only when necessary to protect the population and the government's activities, for the use of force is said to alienate the population. Population-centric COIN views offensive military operations against enemy forces as largely wasteful, because they do not enhance legitimacy and cannot decisively defeat the enemy.

This report builds upon the author's previous research findings in arguing that the most effective counterinsurgencies have succeeded through a third way of counterinsurgency, which combines enemy-centric and population-centric methods in recognition that the enemy and population are both critical and are often inter-related. This third way has been called leader-centric COIN, because its success depends on the will and capabilities of the local leaders who seek to identify and implement the right combination of enemy-centric and population-centric methods. COIN practitioners have employed this approach in many previous conflicts. During the Iraq War, it gained currency on account of the failure of experiments with purely population-centric and purely enemy-centric counterinsurgency. In Afghanistan, many Marine units and some U.S. Army units have also gone the third way, including the battalion covered in this report.



A number of commentators have muddied the waters by attributing American successes in Iraq to the population-centric COIN articulated in the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24.² In actuality, most of the successful U.S. commanders in Iraq—including General David Petraeus, the driving force behind the manual’s creation—did not adhere closely to the purely population-centric paradigm of the COIN manual. Instead, they combined population-security and governance measures with aggressive

offensive operations against enemy forces on the periphery of populous areas and beyond.³

In another muddying of the waters, some population-centric theorists have contended that the COIN Manual called for a full range of military operations, and hence did not rule out enemy-centric operations during any phase of counterinsurgency.⁴ The text of the manual does not bear this claim out. Although the manual acknowledged the need for military operations to clear insurgents from populous areas and keep them away, it emphatically prioritized the population above the enemy and warned repeatedly against emphasis on destroying the enemy through offensive operations. In seeking to steer commanders away from the purely enemy-centric COIN that some units were implementing, it came near the other extreme of purely population-centric COIN. “Legitimacy is the main objective,” stated the manual’s opening chapter. “Killing every insurgent is normally impossible,” it asserted, and “attempting to do so can also be counterproductive in some cases; it risks generating popular resentment, creating martyrs that motivate new recruits, and producing cycles of revenge.” At the top of the manual’s list of unsuccessful COIN practices stood “Overemphasize killing and capturing the enemy rather than securing and engaging the populace,” while the list of successful practices featured “Focus on the population, its needs, and its security.” The section on military operations cautioned against offensive operations that could not be followed by static defense, which in practice would leave most territory off limits in almost any counterinsurgency. “When

patrolling in or occupying an area, clear only what the unit intends to hold,” it asserted. “Otherwise the effort will be wasted as the insurgents reoccupy the area.” The manual’s widely distributed “Guide for Action” stated that counterinsurgents should “only attack insurgents when they get in the way,” because “provoking combat usually plays into the enemy’s hands by undermining the population’s confidence.”⁵

COIN practitioners who have taken the COIN manual to heart have concentrated their efforts on population-centric operations and eschewed enemy-centric operations. Thanks to the buzz surrounding FM 3-24 and the aforementioned misinterpretations of Iraq, such practitioners proliferated in Afghanistan after the Iraq “Surge” of 2007. British leaders in Afghanistan latched onto FM 3-24 in late 2007, after a stint of enemy-centric operations in southern Afghanistan had failed to achieve stability, and for the next several years they conformed to it as faithfully as any Americans. The purity of the British enemy-centric and population-centric approaches in Sangin is one of the reasons why the district was chosen for this study. Another reason is that the U.S. Marines arrived in the fall of 2010 with close to the same number of men as the force that preceded them—in contrast to other areas of Helmand, where the force preceding the Marines had been much smaller—and shifted immediately to leader-centric COIN. Sangin thus permits a comparison of the three approaches in the same place, with the same number of troops, under the same social and political conditions.⁶

Sangin was also selected because more open sources are available on this district than nearly any other district in Afghanistan. Intensive combat attracted journalists and senior coalition officials year after year, many of whom recorded their observations in detail. The sections of this report concerning the period prior to October 2010 were derived almost entirely from published sources. The material covering the deployment of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines is based upon open source materials as well as interviews the author conducted with the battalion and its higher headquarters before, during, and immediately after the battalion’s deployment to Sangin. Any errors contained in this report are the responsibility of the author alone, as this

report represents only the views of its author, not those of the International Security Assistance Forces, the U.S. government, or any branch thereof.

This report is not intended to demonstrate the superiority of any person, organization, or nationality. The people, organizations, and nations covered in this report did not suffer from a lack of courage or commitment; all left their families behind and put themselves at risk for a cause larger than themselves, and some of them gave their lives. They tried to do their best in a war that received too little attention from their countrymen, in some cases laboring under unsound constraints imposed by their government or the host-nation government.

The purpose of this report, rather, is to show that some of the counterinsurgency’s participants were more effective than others because they employed a better counterinsurgency approach. The thoughts and actions of these counterinsurgents deserve careful study because they can help future COIN leaders adopt effective COIN principles and methods, and avoid COIN principles and methods that will result in unnecessary death and destruction.

Historical Background



Sangin district occupies 200 square miles in northeastern Helmand province, abutting Kandahar province on its western border. Bestowed with strategic importance by nature and man, Sangin contains the main pass between Helmand and Kandahar, as well as the main north-south road in Helmand. The Helmand River runs through the western side of the district, amid green farmland that owes its color to irrigation systems built by American engineers in the 1960s. From above, this so-called “green zone” presents a sharp contrast to the brown desert that dominates the district’s eastern side. At present, the district’s

population numbers 100,000 people, of whom 25,000 live in a 25-square-mile town that serves as the administrative capital and commercial center.

The socialist policies of the Kabul government in the late 1970s and the ensuing war shredded the social fabric of Sangin, as they did in most of Helmand. During the late 1970s, the Soviet-backed government in Kabul redistributed land in Helmand and drove off or killed the rural elites who had traditionally governed local communities and served as intermediaries between the central government and the population. The national government sought to fill the leadership vacuum with its own cadre of socialists and opportunists, a process that continued after the Soviet army entered Afghanistan at the end of 1979. But this group soon faced competition from an emerging class of local warlords, who were intent on protecting tribal and family interests and waging holy war against the atheistic Communists of Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. Using Helmand's mountains as bases of operations, they struggled militarily and politically with the Communists for control of Helmand's green lowlands.⁷

The debilitation of the traditional elites and the rise of the warlords did not erode the importance of tribal identity in Helmand. The warlords were unable to establish control over large areas comprising multiple tribes, as warlords were able to do in northern and western Afghanistan. A few tribes dominated each of Helmand's districts, with the exception of the new districts of Nad Ali and Nawa, where the farmers were recent immigrants of diverse backgrounds. In Sangin, the leading tribes were the Ishaqzai, Alikozai, and Noorzai. Throughout the 1980s, Helmand's tribes fought frequently with each other, when they were not fighting the Soviets, the Afghan government, or jihadist groups from other areas.⁸

The most prominent warlord in Helmand during the 1980s was Mullah Mohammad Nasim Akhundzada, who belonged to Helmand's largest tribe, the Alizi. Like many warlords, he owed his political and military power primarily to his charisma and military skill. Those talents also made him a success in establishing narcotics enterprises, which included illicit trading and trucking businesses and the protection of poppy cultivation and transportation routes.

Akhundzada claimed that he invested some of his opium profits into hospitals, clinics, and madrasas for the general population, though it is not clear whether he actually did so.⁹

After the fall of the pro-Soviet government of Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai in 1992, militias loyal to the Akhundzada family and its allies battled militias from southern Helmand for control of Helmand's provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. After a series of military setbacks, the Akhundzadas took the capital in 1993, and Rasul Akhundzada became governor. The next year, however, the Taliban swept into Helmand and ejected the Akhundzadas and the rest of the warlords. The Akhundzada family took refuge in Pakistan, where it struck up a fortuitous friendship with a suave political organizer named Hamid Karzai.

The people of Helmand initially welcomed the Taliban as their saviors from the predation and anarchy of the warlord period. Soon, however, the Taliban lost much of their luster on account of their strict rules, their inability to foster economic development, and their conscription of young men into the poorly managed war against the Northern Alliance.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Taliban maintained control over most of the province through charismatic leadership, impartial administration of justice, and ruthless suppression of opposition.

Post-Taliban Afghanistan, 2001-2005

After the fall of the Taliban in December 2001, the warlords of the 1990s reemerged in Helmand and laid claim to power. Karzai gave the position of provincial governor to Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, son of Rasul Akhundzada, who had died of natural causes during the Taliban period. The other top positions went to leaders of three tribes from the Zirak branch of the Durrani supertribe, which was the branch favored by Karzai. Abdul Rahman Jan, a Noorzai, became the provincial police chief. Mir Wali of the Barakzai tribe became the senior military commander, integrating his militia into the army. For intelligence chief, Karzai appointed Dad

Mohammad Khan, the leading figure of the Alikozai tribe in Helmand. These individuals in turn gave district leadership jobs and other subordinate positions to men from their own tribes.

Another large Helmand tribe, the Ishaqzai, was left out of the spoils of victory. One reason was that the Ishaqzai belonged to the Punjpai branch of the Durrani supertribe, which did not enjoy Karzai's favor. Another was that Helmand's other tribes viewed the Ishaqzai as a "tribe of thieves," and resented them for their past support for the Taliban, which had included providing large numbers of recruits to the Taliban movement.

The loss of power that the Ishaqzai suffered with the installation of the new government was the first of several causes of Ishaqzai hatred for the government. A second was the behavior of the government's new leaders—especially Abdul Rahman Jan, Dad Mohammad Khan, and the latter's brother, Sangin district governor Juma Gul—who used their new powers to prey on the Ishaqzai out of greed or vengeance for wrongs suffered during the Taliban era. The oppression was particularly harsh in Sangin, where much of the Ishaqzai population lived.

When the Taliban returned to Helmand from Pakistan in 2004 and began preparing for insurgency, they focused their recruiting efforts on the Ishaqzai because of the tribe's resentments against other tribes and government leaders, as well as the large representation of Ishaqzai within the ranks of the Taliban leadership. One Sangin resident observed: "Abdul Rahman Jan much increased the support for the Taliban. He was an example the Taliban could use to question the strength of the government. The Taliban come to the village and preach in the mosques. They always name Abdul Rahman Jan."¹¹

The Taliban called on all tribes of Helmand to wage jihad against the Afghan government, denouncing its leaders in Helmand as stooges of the Americans and British and the Tajik warlords of the Northern Alliance.¹² Religious zealotry and xenophobia motivated a minority within the Taliban leadership, principally those who had been educated in extremist madrassas in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but these ideologies held little sway over most of Helmand's

residents. Concerned primarily with local interests, grievances, and enemies, the people of Helmand paid little heed to exhortations for a resistance movement transcending tribes. Taliban commanders learned that gaining supporters required making promises of vengeance against other tribes or government officials. They also found that they had to rely on trusted



families and tribes for assistance to prevent the enemy from infiltrating spies who belonged to rival families or tribes. Taliban fighters were divided into groups of 20 men from the same tribe and kept from interacting with groups from other tribes. When Taliban commanders perished, they were replaced with their nearest relatives, in the belief that those individuals would be the most likely to retain the loyalty of their followers.¹³

The Ishaqzai was the only tribe that firmly supported the Taliban when they embarked on a campaign of violence in

Helmand in 2005, and most of this support came in Sangin. The members of other tribes either backed the government or refrained from taking sides while waiting to see which side would prevail. Another consequence of Afghan provincialism and decades of deadly strife in Afghanistan was a widespread tendency to support the external forces that appeared stronger militarily.

During 2005, the Taliban and their Ishaqzai supporters fought the government and its preferred tribes for political power. Government security forces and pro-government militias offered stiff resistance, preventing the insurgents from seizing control of large chunks of population or terrain. The two sides also vied for control of a resurgent opium trade. Short on cash, the Taliban leadership set aside its religious reservations about narcotics and enmeshed itself in the opium industry of Helmand, which was the highest opium-producing province in the country with the world's highest volume of opium production. The Taliban levied taxes on farmers, traders, and truckers, and in exchange provided them protection and paid off government officials and policemen to look the other way.¹⁴ Owing to Sangin's location and the large presence of the Ishaqzai, the district would become a hub for narcotraffickers as well as insurgents, two groups that became increasingly difficult to tell apart as time went on.

The British Period, 2006-2010

At the beginning of 2006, the British replaced the Americans as the lead foreign ally in Helmand province, part of a nationwide transition of what had been a relatively peaceful Afghanistan to NATO responsibility. The British Ministry of Defense sent 3,150 troops to take charge of security. The soldiers were parceled out in company-sized detachments near the provincial capital Lashkar Gah and the commercial center of Gereshk.¹⁵ A small number of British civilians took over the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), which conducted governance and development activities.

Unlike the Taliban, the British refused to tolerate the participation of their local allies in the opium business. Just as the British were heading into Helmand, nine tons of opium were found in the basement of Governor Akhundzada, prompting the British to demand that he be fired. Although Karzai was close to the Akhundzada family and had condoned much other opium trafficking by leaders within the government, the British were insistent enough to secure the

governor's removal.¹⁶ Mohammad Daoud became the new governor. Helmand's other leading governmental figures were also removed at this juncture because of their complicity in narcotrafficking and other criminal activities. Militiamen belonging to the ousted commanders quit the government's security forces in droves, and some went over to the Taliban in order to protect their commanders' narcotrafficking businesses and take revenge on the British. Tribes that had favored the government split into factions that were pro- and anti-government.¹⁷

Governor Daoud and the province's other new leaders did not possess large militias, large public followings, or strong personalities, and the Kabul government did not send many soldiers or policemen to Helmand to replace those who had left following the purging of the leadership. The newly arrived British forces stayed on their main base at Bastion while they tried to figure out how to prepare for the rapidly evolving challenges of the province.¹⁸ With few armed men enforcing the government's writ in the countryside, the Taliban decided to launch attacks into Helmand's district centers. Commencing in the first months of 2006, they killed a substantial number of the most capable and powerful men who were still in the government. On March 3, they killed Amir Jan, the governor of Sangin district, while he was vacationing in nearby Musa Qala.¹⁹

In the spring, the British responded to the upsurge in Taliban activity by setting up "platoon houses" in the district towns and deploying an additional 1,500 troops to Helmand. The platoon houses were patterned after British patrol bases in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, the conflict that British planners deemed the closest historical precedent. While the platoon houses had been well suited to Northern Ireland, where the insurgents had relied primarily on isolated terrorist strikes against British patrols or civilians, they were not a good fit in Afghanistan because of the insurgency's use of concerted armed force. Assembling men for military action by the score, the resurgent Taliban attacked the platoon houses head-on with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades.²⁰ Rear Admiral Chris Parry, one of the senior British planners involved in the Helmand deployment, said later, "At the time, I think we had an immature approach to what is now known as counter-insurgency. We didn't realise the complexity and

the character of the context in which we were going to fight. In fact, we didn't envisage we were going to fight. I think we took too much baggage with us from previous experience from Borneo, Malaya and Northern Ireland and we hadn't really recognised that the lessons we had taken from those campaigns were valid, but they weren't sufficient for the context of Afghanistan.”²¹

In Sangin and other districts, Taliban attacks put the outnumbered British garrisons on the defensive, and only through great mental fortitude and combat prowess did the British soldiers avoid being overrun. Faced with incessant enemy probes and thrusts, the garrisons could not afford to send men to patrol the populous areas or pursue the enemy in the hinterlands. The Taliban therefore had a relatively free hand to kill or drive out the remaining individuals who were capable of organizing resistance against them. In Sangin, they proved particularly thorough in this activity. On a single day in June 2006, the Taliban murdered 40 relatives and followers of Dad Mohammad Khan, including his brother Juma Gul, the former governor of Sangin.²²

The troubles in Helmand drew close scrutiny from the U.S. military, which kept abreast of developments in all the areas it had handed over to its NATO allies. After several months of deteriorating security, the senior U.S. commander in southern Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Benjamin Freakley, notified the senior British commander in Helmand that British forces needed to get off the big bases and conduct military operations against enemy forces. “You have to be mobile against the Taliban,” Freakley said. “You can't be in a fixed position because the Taliban will hit you.” The British did not act on this advice at first, saying that they were not yet ready to do so. American observers began to fear that the British would hunker down on their bases permanently to minimize casualties, as some of the other NATO partners were doing.²³

The British government, however, soon showed itself willing to release troops from the big bases to undertake risky counterinsurgency operations, something that British officers and their

soldiers had been eager to do. The Royal Marines of 3 Commando Brigade, who arrived in Helmand during October 2006, made mobile offensive operations their top priority. Years of training in enemy-centric warfare and the presence of numerous enemy targets encouraged them to focus on the enemy. The brigade's operations made frequent contact with the enemy and relieved insurgent pressure on the district centers, reducing attacks on the British garrisons by 45 percent. The brigade did not engage in robust population-centric security or governance activities, which enabled the insurgents to continue milking the population's resources. British officers lamented that the insurgents kept fielding new fighters to replace those who had been killed, likening the brigade's work to "mowing the lawn." The brigade that came next, 12 Mechanized Brigade, sought to shift focus to securing the populous areas from Lashkar Gah to Kajaki, but ended up spending most of its time in mobile operations against the insurgents, with results similar to those of 3 Commando.²⁴ With only a brigade to cover a province the size of West Virginia, the British had too few troops to give both the enemy and the population the attention they needed, a fact that British officers reported to their civilian masters repeatedly.

During this period, the British supported and worked with the top-down governmental apparatus—the provincial government and the Afghan national security forces—but on one notable occasion they attempted a bottom-up approach. In October 2006, over objections from the British ISAF commander General David Richards, British officials negotiated a deal with elders in Musa Qala whereby British forces, the Afghan National Security Forces, and the Taliban would all depart Musa Qala and allow the community's elders to run the district. Whether the elders thought the deal would work, or were merely acting as front men for the Taliban, is not clear. Soon after the deal was struck, the Taliban poured into Musa Qala in unprecedented numbers, took control from the elders, and made the district a large base for insurgency and narcotrafficking.²⁵

The next spring, the British received another opportunity to promote Afghan self-government and self-defense, but found it less attractive because it involved empowering one tribe rather than a whole community. In May 2007, an Alikozai school teacher in the Sarawan Qala area of

Sangin assassinated a Taliban commander who had refused a request to remove his forces from Sarawan Qala. He then went to the British base in Sangin to seek protection and support against the Taliban. The British turned him away, citing a scarcity of resources and an aversion to taking sides in tribal disputes. The teacher headed to Kandahar, but was captured by the Taliban on the way and beheaded. The Taliban proceeded to kill other Alikozai tribal leaders in Sangin, which ensured that the Alikozai made no further attempts at resistance, if the British rejection had not already done so.²⁶

In October 2007, the British 52 Infantry Brigade took over security in Helmand. Its commander, Brigadier Andrew Mackay, concluded that the failure of enemy-centric operations to suppress the insurgency had demonstrated the bankruptcy of enemy-centric COIN. Because the British military was short on formal counterinsurgency doctrine, Brigadier Mackay had turned for an alternative doctrine to the recently issued US Army/US Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24, and had found it persuasive. Consequently, he resolved to shift the British military's focus from the enemy to the population and employ force sparingly in order to avoid inflicting civilian casualties that could create new insurgents and to avoid killing enemy leaders who might eventually serve as peacemakers. "We're at risk of killing the Gerry Adams or Martin McGuinness of the Taliban," Mackay explained to his staff.²⁷ Mackay's position received reinforcement from Sherard Cowper-Coles, who had become the British ambassador to Afghanistan in 2007. "It's a mistake to believe you can shoot or bomb your way to a stable



Sherard Cowper-Coles, former British ambassador to Afghanistan
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political solution in Afghanistan," Cowper-Coles contended.²⁸ Cowper-Coles went so far as to organize a counterinsurgency conference in Kabul that was intended "to get our colleagues, especially the Americans, to see that successful COIN required more politics than force."²⁹

On orders from Mackay, 52 Brigade concentrated on holding large population centers— mainly the district towns plus Lashkar Gah and Gereshk—and expanding the government’s influence through governance and development. Mackay assigned large numbers of soldiers to “Non-Kinetic Effects Teams” and “Development and Influence Teams.” Combat troops would remain with the same portion of the population throughout their tours to “provide reassurance and provide clear proof that our presence is not transient or temporary.” Success would be measured by the government’s influence over the population, not by the count of enemy casualties, which Mackay called a “corrupt measure of success.”³⁰ Because of the shift from enemy-centric COIN to population-centric COIN, friendly casualties went down and governance and development activities increased in the towns, including the town in Sangin, but at the cost of rising enemy strength and insurgent domination of most of the rural population.

During Mackay’s tenure, coalition leaders decided that the town of Musa Qala had to be retaken. The British wanted to use as little force as possible, in order to minimize collateral damage that would upset the population, so they encircled the town for several months and broadcast openly that they were going to retake it. British planners were not overly concerned by the possibility that the enemy would slip away, since they had decided that it was the population, not the enemy, that mattered in counterinsurgency. When four thousand British troops, one thousand ANA, and smaller numbers of other NATO troops finally entered the town, the enemy offered little resistance. Three coalition troops were killed, and twelve were wounded. Most of the insurgents had fled into the mountains to the north, either before or during the fighting. Henceforth, the British concentrated on rebuilding the government and police force in the town and did not go into the hinterlands. The Taliban therefore retained their grip over the rural population, along with their ability to inflict casualties on the Afghan government and ISAF.³¹ The Taliban would remain strong in Musa Qala until large numbers of American forces moved in three years later.

16 Brigade, which replaced 52 Brigade in April 2008, continued the population-centric approach. Counterinsurgency “is much more political than it is military,” said the brigade’s commander, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith. Carleton-Smith told the commander of the 3rd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, which spent part of its tour in Sangin, that they were “not going out to fight at every opportunity and should consider sometimes withdrawing from a battle which we could win but which would have no strategic effect.” When an opportunity to kill insurgents carried a risk of harming civilians, Carleton-Smith believed, the counterinsurgents should avoid shooting at the insurgents but should instead fire warning shots that would scare the insurgents away.³² 16 Brigade worked more closely with the PRT, increasing the number of military personnel supporting the PRT from 19 to 48.³³ With more troops than previous brigades, a total of 7,800 in all, it sought to expand the British areas of operation to cover a greater number of Helmand’s residents.

Some of the brigade’s officers subscribed wholeheartedly to Carleton-Smith’s population-centric COIN principles, but others found them inappropriate to the situation at hand and took advantage of the decentralized nature of command in COIN to conduct operations that were partly or entirely enemy-centric in nature. Major Stuart McDonald, one of the company commanders serving under Carleton-Smith, said that for him, counterinsurgency “was about denying [the insurgents] safe havens. It was about taking the fight to them and showing them that it didn’t matter that they were in the mountains where they thought they were inaccessible, we can strike wherever we want.” According to Patrick Bishop, who chronicled the exploits of the British in Helmand during this period, officers like McDonald believed that enemy-centric operations would have an influence on the people’s minds, for they would help “demonstrate to local people the military superiority of the Allies.” They would “plant the idea that the Afghan government and its foreign backers held the balance of power” and “would turn out to be the winning side,” thereby convincing Afghans that “it would be sensible to join them now.”³⁴

British military officers in the outlying areas of Sangin found Carleton-Smith's population-centric COIN to be entirely impracticable because the insurgency's practice of attacking every patrol the British sent out demanded that they devote all their time and energy to security operations. They had to focus on the enemy to protect themselves, deny the enemy the initiative, inflict damage on the enemy forces, and show that their resolve could not be broken.³⁵ In the town of Sangin, insurgent military pressure caused British forces to conduct most of their governance, development, and population-security activities within a single square kilometer, into which the insurgents occasionally conducted strikes.³⁶

The head of the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, Hugh Powell, also disagreed with fundamental elements of Carleton-Smith's population-centric COIN. Many of the conclusions Powell drew from his time in Helmand, in fact, are to be found in the leader-centric theory of counterinsurgency. Whereas Carleton-Smith downplayed the importance of the military aspects of counterinsurgency, Powell believed security to be preeminent in determining people's behavior. "What people on the ground respond to is security or whoever has the power," he remarked. In Powell's view, the only thing that influenced the population's political allegiance besides security was governance. He found in Helmand that both security and governance hinged upon the quality of Afghan leadership. Nothing could be accomplished when "key figures are either useless or corrupt," and therefore improving leadership selection in the Afghan government "is absolutely critical to making progress." He recommended "some form of external scrutiny of key appointments" to "reduce the degree to which key appointments are bought and sold."³⁷

As the tour of 16 Brigade proceeded, Carleton-Smith became less sanguine about the prospects for population-centric COIN in Helmand, although he did not abandon the doctrine. In October 2008, he said publicly that it was necessary to "lower our expectations" for Afghanistan. "We're not going to win this war. It's about reducing it to a manageable level of insurgency that's not a strategic threat and can be managed by the Afghan army.... I don't think we should expect that when we go there won't be roaming bands of armed men in this part of the world. That would

be unrealistic and probably incredible.” He said that the coalition should seek a negotiated compromise with the Taliban. “We want to change the nature of the debate from one where disputes are settled through the barrel of the gun to one where it is done through negotiations,” Carleton-Smith asserted. “If the Taliban were prepared to sit on the other side of the table and talk about a political settlement, then that’s precisely the sort of progress that concludes insurgencies like this.”³⁸ The Taliban, however, was showing no interest in sitting down at the table to negotiate a compromise political settlement, most likely because they expected to win an uncompromised victory through the barrel of a gun. That expectation was the most logical one to be had, considering the weakness of the Afghan government, the aversion of the British to combat, and the eagerness to depart that was suggested by repeated British efforts to facilitate negotiations.

The year 2008 witnessed significant efforts by both the Afghan government and the Taliban to increase the quality of governance in Helmand. During January, Mullah Omar relieved the top Taliban commander in Helmand for insubordination and criminality. The Taliban leadership also ordered commanders to be kinder to the people and tolerate practices that they had formerly banned, such as listening to music, shaving, and kite flying. On the government side, a new provincial police chief took office in February, and within his first thirty days arrested 37 of his own officers for offenses such as extortion, kidnapping, and the release of prisoners in exchange for bribes.³⁹ Mohammad Gulab Mangal became the provincial governor in March after several years of distinguished service as governor of Laghman and Paktika provinces. As a Pashtun from eastern Afghanistan, he did not have a militia, tribe, or mafia upon whom he could readily call for support, but his outsider status did enable him to act as a disinterested mediator of disputes and hence as a unifier of Helmand’s tribes. He soon acquired a reputation for impartiality and dedication among Helmand’s residents. Foreigners viewed him as either an Eliot Ness pure and simple, or an Eliot Ness by Afghan standards, meaning one whose use of public office for private gain was more modest than that of most Afghan leaders.

Sangin was an area of particular concern to Governor Mangal. In January 2009, he told a visiting American delegation of his frustration with British efforts, which had continued along population-centric lines under the brigade that had replaced Carleton-Smith's brigade a few months earlier.⁴⁰ Mangal remarked that British operations in Sangin had failed to provide security, even in the town bazaar, or to develop rapport with civilians. By clinging to their bases and the town center, the British were reaching few people and permitting the Taliban to roam free across most of the district. The British, the governor said, needed to leave their bases in order to patrol and engage with the people.⁴¹ British intelligence reports from this period lent support to Mangal's bleak assessment, showing that the Taliban were twice as numerous as they had been when the British arrived in 2006.⁴²

Whether because of pressure from Mangal or the Americans or a change of British hearts, British security operations did pick up in Sangin during the spring of 2009. A British battle group and a 400-man Afghan National Army battalion with 45 British Army advisers patrolled from the district center and an array of patrol bases nearby, while mobile forces conducted a series of raids into the Upper Sangin Valley. Firefights and IEDs claimed the lives of 22 British soldiers in Sangin during the spring and summer. Towards the end of the summer, political pressure from London to reduce casualties caused the frequency of British patrols to diminish, prompting the enemy to draw close to the British bases as they had done prior to the increase in British mobile operations. The insurgents regained control of much of the town, and counterinsurgent interaction with the population declined considerably. By August, patrols could go out no further than 200 meters without hitting large numbers of IEDs and small arms fire.⁴³

During this period, a number of British officers in the field continued to question the wisdom of population-centric COIN. Major Giles Harris, the commander of the Prince of Wales Company of the Welsh Guards, remarked at the end of his tour that success "required significant violence at times which, if properly balanced with honest engagement with the population, was a positive force." He observed that "despite all our humane and academic wishes for the non-kinetic fight, the key to success at the tactical level... was the ability to wield credible power over the enemy

such that they were intimidated and those we were trying to support or protect were encouraged.”⁴⁴

Neither such comments nor the events on the ground caused a shift at higher levels. General Jack Dutton, the senior British commander in Afghanistan at this time, also weighed in on the side of minimum use of force and maximum concern about popular opinion, remarking that “if you are in a situation where there is any chance of creating civilian casualties, or you don't know whether you will create civilian casualties, if you can withdraw from that situation without firing then you must do so.”⁴⁵

In November 2009, command of Regional Command South passed to Major General Nick Carter of the United Kingdom, one of the most enthusiastic proponents of population-centric counterinsurgency. As a British officer, he would possess considerably more influence over the British units in Helmand than his Dutch and Canadian predecessors. General Carter expressed his views on COIN as follows: “We're not in the business of conducting an attritional campaign. The business we're doing here is about bringing people into the tent and using the full range of political levers to achieve that effect. So we will not be going head-to-head with insurgents in vineyards and orchards. What we will be doing will be a rather more sophisticated approach that plays to the enemy's weaknesses.”⁴⁶ On another occasion, when a reporter asked him a question about insurgent casualties, he replied, “I'm not going to go into the number of insurgents that have been killed or detained, because at the end of the day what we're trying to do here is we're trying to measure our success by the extent to which we protect a population, rather than kill or defeat insurgents. Because ultimately what I'd like to see happen, going back to the discussion on reintegration, and the Afghan government in particular would like to see happen, is that people simply put their weapons down and come over to the side of the government. So measuring somebody as an insurgent or not is less relevant when you're dealing with that sort of political argument.”⁴⁷



British army Maj. Gen. Nick Carter
www.defenseimagery.mil

The new head of the Helmand PRT, Lindy Cameron, espoused similar ideas. “We need to compete for hearts and minds through government structures,” Cameron said. “We need to make Taliban fighters feel like they have a constant choice, not that once they join the Taliban they’re beyond the pale but instead give them reasons to think life is better elsewhere.” Cameron deemed governance the most important part of COIN, followed, in no particular order, by development and security. She also stressed the importance of having Afghans do the work of government, instead of having foreigners do it for them. Thus far, she said, the greatest achievement of the 300-person Helmand PRT was “the fact that the governor has managed to visit all 13 districts.”⁴⁸ Based on the principle that governance came before military operations, Cameron and Carter agreed that the PRT would take the leading role in formulating the Helmand Plan, the overarching counterinsurgency plan for the province, leaving the military in the subordinate role of executing the plan’s security elements.⁴⁹

The British counterinsurgency vision was on a collision course with that of the U.S. Marine Corps, which had deployed an expeditionary brigade to Helmand in the middle of 2009. In Iraq, the Marine Corps had tried population-centric counterinsurgency and had found it incapable of defeating the hardcore insurgents of Anbar province. Some Marine commanders had conducted exclusively enemy-centric operations and had seen the enemy continue to draw new manpower from the population. Enterprising commanders had shifted to counterinsurgency that combined aggressive, enemy-centric security operations with population-centric security operations, governance, and targeted development. This approach gained in popularity across the Marine Corps as word of its effectiveness spread through Powerpoint presentations, books, and articles. The idea of confining operations to populous areas and leaving the enemy free to roam unmolested in most of the countryside ran contrary to this third way of COIN, as well as to the Marine service culture, which stressed relentless patrolling and destruction of the enemy. Col. George Amland, the deputy commander of the Marine expeditionary brigade in Helmand, told Joshua Partlow of the *Washington Post* in early 2010 that “I’m not a big fan of the population-centric approach. We can’t sit still. We have to pursue and chase these guys.”⁵⁰

The brigade’s commander, Brigadier General Lawrence D. Nicholson, allocated some of his units to population-security missions and sent others to find and destroy enemy forces, justifying the latter with the comment that “I won’t tolerate a sanctuary anywhere in Helmand. I want to unhinge the Taliban psychologically – keep them on the run.”⁵¹



U.S. Marine Brig. Gen. Lawrence D. Nicholson

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Some of the insurgent safe havens were located near large population centers where the coalition had a large presence, like Sangin. Others consisted of entire districts that the coalition had largely left alone, owing to their distance from the center of the province and the low number of foreign troops available.

The most formidable of the enemy sanctuaries was Marjah, an area of Nad Ali district that was the size of Washington, DC and lay only twenty kilometers to the west of the provincial capital. From the beginning of the Marine brigade’s deployment, Nicholson lobbied with higher authorities for permission to enter Marjah. Initially, permission was denied, but Nicholson’s persistence eventually gained him authorization to enter Marjah in February 2010.

The planning for Marjah brought into stark relief the differences between the U.S. Marine approach to counterinsurgency and the population-centric approach that the British had picked up from American counterinsurgency theory and doctrine. The British wanted to broadcast news of the impending operation to encourage the insurgents to leave. Marine planners wanted to move in quietly and swiftly and crush the insurgents before they could prepare for battle. The Marines yielded on this point, in part because Governor Mangal favored the British plan to announce the operation in the interest of minimizing damage to the city.

When the coalition forces entered Marjah, they faced substantial fighting for a few days, but many insurgents slipped out before or during the operation. They returned soon thereafter to terrorize civilians and government officials and inflict casualties on the counterinsurgent forces.

The Marines wanted to flood Marjah with patrols to disrupt and destroy the insurgents, but they had too few troops for the task, and General Carter did not see the need for more forces because of his preference for political activities over military operations. The lack of progress in Marjah during the ensuing months caused the ISAF commander, General Stanley McChrystal, to question whether this preference was part of the problem.. “I think we have let too much move along without overwhelming-enough security, and I think we are paying the price for it,” McChrystal said of Marjah in May. “This is a bleeding ulcer right now.” McChrystal told General Carter that more troops should have been sent to Marjah to provide security. Carter replied, “I don't agree with you about putting more forces in there. This is about convincing people.”⁵² Many more months passed, and many more people were killed or wounded, before the insurgency was suppressed in Marjah.



Ret. U.S. Army Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal

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In the first half of 2010, British forces increased the number of small patrol bases in Sangin to 22, although the bases remained concentrated in the vicinity of the town center. Increasing the number of bases provided better observation and access, and strengthened control over supply lines, but also tied down

more troops in base security. Despite the static security requirements, however, the British stepped up their patrolling and clashed frequently with the insurgents. The British military commander in Sangin, Lieutenant Colonel Nick Kitson, kept most of the patrols within the town, which remained encircled by armed insurgents. In adherence to the PRT’s Helmand Plan and the guidance of General Carter, Kitson viewed the military’s mission as providing enough security for the Afghan district governor and other Afghan officials to interact with the people, so that the government could “win the argument” with the Taliban, which was a “socio-political argument, not a fighting argument.”⁵³ Offensive operations aimed at killing the insurgents could not “win the argument.”

During 2010, political pressure mounted in Britain for a drawdown of forces, which led to increasingly frequent pronouncements from British officials in Afghanistan that the use of force would so embitter the insurgents that they would never engage in the negotiations that resolve the conflict. The urge to convince the Taliban to negotiate also induced the British to pour more money into development projects across the district. The absence of British security forces prevented development personnel from visiting the projects beyond the town, so they monitored project progress by asking Afghan elders to provide photographs. If the elders did not provide the photographs but offered plausible excuses, the money kept flowing.

The development aid failed to facilitate meaningful negotiations, generate support for the government, or otherwise alter the security situation. The elders often diverted the aid into their own pockets and those of the Taliban. Progress in governance was little better; the holding of shuras in the district center made for good photo opportunities but did not change the behavior of people in outlying areas or break the Taliban's monopoly on justice, taxation, and intimidation.⁵⁴

Rumors abounded that the British troops remained garrisoned around the town center and avoided aggressive pursuit of the enemy because of political pressure from London to limit casualties. Complaints in the British press about the seeming lack of progress in Sangin did, in fact, create much apprehension in Whitehall over events in Sangin, but political pressure was not the main reason for the British COIN approach in Sangin. The British troops were, in fact, continuing to conduct operations that carried large risks of casualties, sustaining over thirty killed during the first half of the year.⁵⁵ The main reason for the concentration of troops in the town was ongoing adherence to population-centric counterinsurgency.

Regional Command Southwest is Formed, June 2010

In June 2010, ISAF created Regional Command-Southwest by splitting Helmand and Nimruz provinces off from Regional Command-South. As part of the larger troop surge authorized by President Barack Obama six months earlier, the U.S. Marine presence in Helmand went from an expeditionary brigade to the division-sized First Marine Expeditionary Force-Forward, the commander of which, Major General Richard Mills, became the commander of RC-Southwest. Although the British retained a large troop presence in Helmand, the shift in RC leadership from the British to the Americans left the Americans with a considerably larger say in the overall conduct of the war in Helmand. The British, however, retained control of the Provincial Reconstruction Team and its subordinate elements at the district level, the District Stability Teams. Whereas the Marines reported to ISAF in Kabul, the Provincial Reconstruction Team reported to the British government in London. Further complicating matters was the formation of a new American “regional platform” for RC-Southwest, which fell under the U.S. embassy in Kabul and had nebulous authority and influence in the realms of governance and development.

Mills and the British authorities decided that all British military units would complete their tours in their existing locations, and then the next British units would be funneled into central Helmand, thickening the troop densities in important districts. Incoming U.S. Marine units would move into Sangin and other troublesome districts of northern Helmand held previously by British forces. This shift would mute the rising outcry in Britain over the casualties and lack of progress in Sangin, which had reached such a pitch that it threatened to unravel British public support for the entire war.



U.S. Marine Maj. Gen. Richard P. Mills (left), commander of Regional Command Southwest
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Mills also wanted to put Marines in Sangin because he thought the leader-centric approach to COIN would succeed where population-centric COIN had failed and he considered Sangin one of

the most important districts in Helmand. At this time, the champions of population-centric counterinsurgency in Kabul were arguing that Sangin was of secondary importance to the more populous districts of central Helmand. The Marines countered that Sangin was crucial because the insurgents were using the district as a base for recruiting fighters and launching operations elsewhere in Helmand and Kandahar, and as a hub for smuggling drugs and weapons.

Although Mills recognized the importance of “population-centric” operations to secure and govern the population, he firmly believed that success also required “enemy-centric” actions to seize the initiative and destroy enemy forces. “When you fight the COIN [counter-insurgency] fight, there has to be a balance,” Mills said. “You focus on the population, but you can't lose sight of the enemy either. He has to be dealt with.”⁵⁶ This view squared with that of the general who would become the ISAF commander a few months after General Mills arrived, General David Petraeus. Taking command in the middle of the summer, Petraeus emphasized the importance of kinetic as well as non-kinetic actions and relaxed restrictions on the use of force. His COIN guidance did not warn of the dangers of killing insurgents, and instead emphasized the need to “pursue the enemy relentlessly,” along with the need to secure the population and promote good governance.⁵⁷

The conviction of the new RC-Southwest leadership that the enemy had to be hunted and destroyed led inevitably to disputes with the Helmand PRT. The PRT leadership tried to get the Marines to adhere to the Helmand Plan and take direction on military matters, but all that their discussions did was convince the Marines that the PRT had a superficial understanding of military affairs and counterinsurgency. The Marines chose to ignore the PRT's directives and its subsequent objections to the aggressive military operations the Marines resolved to undertake in highly violent districts like Sangin. They also decided to take charge of short-term development and governance activities, rather than seek cooperation from recalcitrant civilians.

Although most of the U.S. Marines and the British officials kept quiet about these differences, a few opened their mouths to the international press, resulting in a public airing of the dispute during September, just as the Marines were preparing to take over Sangin. Journalists relayed accusations from unnamed Americans that a lack of British military patrolling had allowed the insurgents to thrive in Helmand. The Taliban, it was noted, had operated a prison in Musa Qala within one mile of a British base for three years without being discovered, whereas the U.S. Marines found the prison right after they took charge of security in Musa Qala. British observers countered that Musa Qala had become worse since the U.S. Marines took over four months earlier, because American patrolling into surrounding areas had left fewer troops to protect the population of the town. Afghan civilians and the district governor reportedly favored the Marine interpretation of events. “When the British were here, they didn't care about security in the bazaar. They would fight and leave,” said Sher Agha, the owner of a small telephone store in Musa Qala. “The Marines patrol all the time.”⁵⁸

3rd Battalion, 5th Marines in Sangin, October 2010-April 2011

During the summer and early fall of 2010, the foreign press was rife with speculation that the Americans would dispatch the Marines to Sangin in much greater strength than the British battle group they were replacing. Mills, however, assigned the Sangin mission to just one battalion, the 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marines, which was slightly smaller than the British battle group. During predeployment training, Mills had determined that 3/5 and its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Jason Morris, were first rate, and he had confidence in their ability to accomplish the mission.⁵⁹

Mills did not handpick 3/5 to go to Sangin. The battalion simply happened to be the one rotating into Afghanistan when the British battle group was rotating out. Mills and others on his

staff said afterwards that most other Marine battalions demonstrated strengths similar to those of 3/5, which is testimony to the rigorous screening process employed by the Marine Corps in selecting the commanders of its infantry battalions. Nevertheless, there was some variation in the capabilities of Marine commanders in Helmand, as there always is in war, and the commander of 3/5 was among the best of a very strong group.

Lieutenant Colonel Morris came to Afghanistan with a high reputation within the Marine Corps as both a leader and a thinker. He had excelled as a company commander, served two tours in Iraq, and graduated among the top students at the U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College and the elite School of Advanced Warfighting. Like many successful Marine infantry officers, he spent much of his spare time reading books on history and international affairs, and before deploying to Afghanistan he read every book he could find on the country. Morris had the charisma to lead and the sociability to make friends, both vital for commanders in counterinsurgency. He was also well endowed with what Marines call “intelligent aggressiveness.”

Like General Mills, Morris was convinced that defeating tough insurgents required large doses of both “enemy-centric” operations and “population-centric” operations. Mills had told him to get Marines into every part of his area of operations and deny the enemy any safe havens, which meant sending many of his patrols beyond the confines of the town and the villages. Morris was not fixated on the number of enemy casualties, but believed that accomplishing the mission would have to involve finding and destroying the insurgents, not merely scaring them away. They would be careful in using force, but would not shy from using it out of concern for whether the insurgents might be future negotiating partners or might have brothers who could become accidental guerrillas. While he stressed the importance of engaging the population, he also instilled in his officers a determination to fight the enemy relentlessly and a skepticism about COIN theories that promised “winning without fighting.” When one of the 3/5 company commanders found his men reading the book *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson, which argued that insurgency could be thwarted through female education and other forms of

development rather than through combat, he told his Marines that if Greg Mortenson attempted to build a girls' school in Sangin, he would get skinned alive.⁶⁰

Morris intended to start his campaign in Sangin by saturating the twenty-five square miles of the town with patrols, to remove the insurgents from the sections of the town that they still



U.S. Marine Corps settles a claim with an Afghan farmer while conducting a security patrol in Sangin
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dominated. Initially, they would operate out of 11 patrol bases. A few weeks before 3/5 began arriving in Sangin, the 3rd Battalion of the 7th Marines had come to the district to conduct operations outside the town aimed at relieving enemy pressure and depleting the insurgency's ranks. The battalion was not present long

enough to make dramatic changes to the security situation, but it did make lasting changes to the posture of coalition forces, as it closed half of the existing 22 patrol bases to free up more troops for patrolling. From the start, therefore, 3/5 would have many more troops available for patrolling than the preceding battle group had been able to muster.

The Marines of 3/5 planned to extend their patrols outwards from the town, gradually enlarging the "security bubble," or "oil spot" as it had been termed in years past. As the bubble expanded, new patrol bases would be established further from the town's center. They would not stop until the bubble encompassed their entire area of operations, which included everything in the district except the Upper Sangin Valley. Like the British before them, the Marines made a separate battle space of the Upper Sangin Valley, an area accounting for two thirds of the territory of Sangin but only twenty percent of the population, and stationed no forces there on a permanent basis.

Population-centric COIN advocates, including the British in Sangin, had embraced the concept of an expanding security bubble as part of a “clear, hold, and build” phasing of counterinsurgency. The counterinsurgents would first clear an area of enemy combatants, then hold it with security forces to prevent the insurgents from returning, and build local security and governance capabilities with the assistance of development projects. For the most part, population-centrists recognized the need to use military force to remove insurgents in the clear phase and to keep them out during the hold and build phases, but unlike the Marines they wanted to restrict their security operations to populous areas within the bubble. Such a distinction would not matter very much when expanding a security bubble in a city, because the contiguous distribution of population meant that the security bubble remained population-centric as it expanded. In a rural setting like Helmand, however, an outward expansion from a town would soon meet with patches of thinly populated or unpopulated territory. Population-centric COIN would then incline the commander to halt the bubble at the fringes of the population. If possible, he would try to form smaller bubbles around outlying villages. Garrisoning such a collection of villages and keeping them resupplied, however, requires volumes of manpower that often exceed what is available to the counterinsurgents. Such was, indeed, the case in Helmand, which was why the British security bubbles did not cover very much of the population beyond the towns.

The Marines, on the other hand, saw a need for enemy-centric operations during all the phases of “clear, hold, and build.” During the hold and build phases, they would patrol the populous areas to deny the insurgents access and permit the initiation of governance and development, but they would also send patrols into unpopulated areas where they suspected the enemy of hiding, and fight insurgents relentlessly whenever and wherever they found them. Through these tactics, they sought to create one large security bubble covering both the populous and non-populous parts of the whole area of operations.

The Marine approach also differed in that it involved going outside the bubble at times, into both unpopulated and populated territory, in order to defeat enemy forces or build support for

the government. While population-centric theorists warned that such operations would expose the population in the security bubble to the claws of the insurgents, the Marines believed that their offensive operations would reduce enemy pressure on the defensive positions in the security bubble, by disrupting the enemy's preparations and inflicting casualties.

Morris ordered his company commanders to patrol on foot, and at a high rate. Foot patrolling would facilitate interaction with the population and enable the Marines to enter the many sections of Sangin that were inaccessible by vehicle. The Marines would use Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles and other vehicles only to provide rapid reinforcements to units already in contact with the enemy. Combating insurgents and disarming IEDs were the top priorities for the Marine patrols at first, but the Marines were also directed to drink tea with locals and interact with them regularly as conditions permitted. Morris insisted that Afghan soldiers or policemen accompany all Marine patrols, though individual Afghans were not expected to patrol as frequently as the Marines, for the Afghans served for years at a time rather than in seven-month increments as the Marines did and would be unable to sustain the Marine pace for long.

Several years earlier, in Iraq, foot patrolling had been touted as less dangerous than vehicular patrolling. By permitting greater presence and influence amid the population, foot patrolling enabled the detection of the IEDs that would kill counterinsurgents who were riding in Humvees or other vehicles. By 2010, that theory had lost much of its force. For one, the MRAP had sharply reduced casualties among vehicle passengers. For another, the enemy had become more proficient at developing IEDs that could kill or maim soldiers patrolling on foot. Units could hold down their casualties and claim they were doing "population-centric" counterinsurgency by driving MRAPs to government offices, private homes, or development projects, then driving back to the base. Some coalition commanders in Afghanistan were taking that path, more often because of aversion to the risk of casualties than because of the absence of insurgent activity beyond the roads. In areas of significant insurgent strength, that type of counterinsurgency left the enemy in charge of everything beyond a few hundred meters of the

roads and bases, including most of the manpower, information, food, and poppies that were to be had. It also left the enemy with the strength to overwhelm the government once the foreign forces departed.

Morris did not announce his intentions to the enemy, having noted that the telegraphing of plans had allowed insurgents to flee places like Musa Qala and Marjah and then return quietly to take sucker punches at the Marines and their Afghan allies. He wanted to engage the insurgents right away and capture or kill as many as possible. Inflicting losses on the insurgents up front would weaken the insurgents and shift the loyalties of opportunists, whom the Marines believed to constitute the large majority of Sangin's population. According to Marine estimates, only ten to fifteen percent of the Taliban were irrevocably committed to their cause. All the others were looking out for themselves and would abandon the Taliban if the risks to their well-being became too great.⁶¹

As a policy, the Marines intended to draw no distinction between religious zealots and drug traffickers, which were often closely intertwined in any event. The security situation was so dire, they believed, that they could not afford to divert resources to a counternarcotics program aimed at narcotics processors, traders, and transporters, as counternarcotics experts might have advised. The Marine leadership also decided that they would not try to destroy the poppy crop in Sangin and other areas of Helmand, since so much of the population derived



A group of Afghans harvest the sap from poppy plant in Sangin, Afghanistan
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their livelihood from it and would be more likely to fight the Marines if that livelihood were at stake. Once the district had been secured, they would let the provincial governor conduct poppy eradication and bring in civilians who could help farmers grow alternative crops.

The British governance and development officials in the Sangin District Stabilization Team objected to the Marine approach as too heavy-handed and called upon the Marines to support the team's governance and development initiatives. When the Marines disregarded their advice, the British could not stop them or organize alternative activities outside the town, since the military had a separate chain of command and, in an area as dangerous as Sangin, civilians could undertake no actions outside their bases without the military's cooperation. Put off by the lack of cooperation from the DST, the Marines crafted their own comprehensive counterinsurgency plan and set out to implement most facets of it themselves. In terms of governance, Morris intended to bring the district governor into areas once security improved, and to build up the governor's staff. Revamping the coalition approach to development, Morris made development aid conditional on support from the local population and refused to fund development in areas that coalition forces did not visit regularly. Later, following a change in leadership, the District Stabilization Team would decide that collaborating with the Marines was their best option, and henceforth would become more involved in governance and development.

3/5 established its headquarters at Forward Operating Base Jackson, the largest base in Sangin. Each company had a command post at a smaller base, from which it would cover a section of the battalion's area of operations. While Morris had prescribed some tactics and imposed some restrictions, he left the company commanders great latitude in the conduct of operations. They could take their Marines anywhere in the district whenever they deemed it necessary for mission accomplishment. He would visit each of them once per week, and speak with them and their staffs together as a group every evening by video teleconference.

On October 13, the day 3/5 took control of Sangin, the first Marine patrol to leave the wire came under fire 150 feet from the perimeter. One member of this patrol was shot dead. Within the next four days, another eight Marines died. The insurgents did not relent after taking significant casualties in the early encounters with Marines, having concluded that they could not afford to abandon their last remaining safe haven and opium trafficking hub in Helmand.

Although stiff enemy resistance had been anticipated, the extent of the resistance encountered in Sangin surprised many of the Marines, from the privates all the way up to General Mills, as it was stronger than any Taliban resistance that Marines had witnessed previously in Afghanistan. During prior major Marine operations in Helmand, the insurgents had fought toe-to-toe for a few days and then relied primarily on IEDs and small hit-and-run ambushes. The insurgents in Sangin kept attacking in large numbers, and regrouped for counter-attacks after the initial volleys instead of dispersing. A veteran of the fighting in Nawa district who served with 3/5 in Sangin remarked, "In Nawa, they wait for you and then strike. In Sangin, they come after you."⁶² The Marines of 3/5 fought more than 100 firefights in their first three weeks, sustaining a total of 62 casualties during that period.

The insurgents were similarly surprised by the behavior of their new enemies. In the face of numerous and often gruesome casualties, Marine officers refused to reduce the frequency of patrols into dangerous areas or decrease the fraction of patrols conducted on foot, which remained constant at ninety-five percent to the end of the year. When confronted by insurgent fighters, the Marines did not fire warning shots or back away in order to avoid harming civilians or insurgents, but instead kept fighting until the enemy was destroyed or driven off. An Afghan officer who had been in Sangin for two years remarked in November, "When the Taliban attacked, the British would retreat into their base, but the Marines fight back."⁶³

The insurgents were also caught off guard by the willingness of the Marines to go on the offensive in areas that coalition forces had previously avoided. When the insurgent forces attempted to mass in areas outside the security bubble" for attacks into the bubble, the Marines arrived in force and inflicted heavy losses. After a few such incidents, the insurgents stopped assembling in large numbers, which reduced their ability to ambush the Marines and intimidate the population.

To maintain morale in the face of accumulating casualties, Marine officers and NCOs kept their Marines focused on the need to defeat the enemy and avenge the fallen, and kept them active



so that they did not have time to mope. “You really can't prepare a Marine to lose his good buddy or see another one of his buddies with both his legs blown off,” said Captain Chris Esrey, commander of India company. “The best way to overcome that is to get right back out on a patrol the next day because it doesn't happen every time you go out.”⁶⁴ The confidence,

personal magnetism, and tactical competence of Marine officers and NCOs helped channel the men’s frustrations into positive action, and helped prevent the onset of psychiatric problems. All of the Sangin veterans interviewed for this report said that the casualties suffered by 3/5 increased the desire of the Marines to defeat the enemy.

In a few cases, Lieutenant Colonel Morris became concerned that officers or NCOs were not keeping their Marines sufficiently focused or organized. During predeployment training, Morris had developed reservations about a number of individuals, but had decided to try coaching some of them rather than replacing them. The stress of actual combat, however, proved to be too much for some, despite ongoing coaching efforts. Morris identified suitable replacements among his staff and swapped them with the individuals in question. Other officers in the battalion recounted that these changes caused some short-term disruption, but led to enduring improvements in tactical performance and morale.

The Marines initially patrolled in squad size, but found that one squad was not enough because the enemy was attacking in larger numbers than anticipated. They needed more firepower, and they needed more men to continue the patrol after sustaining initial casualties, for it took close to a squad to evacuate a single casualty. Consequently, they started using two squads for all their patrols. This shift would cut the number of patrols in half, a huge hindrance in a campaign that depended upon intensive patrolling, but it would not prove an insurmountable obstacle.

The magnitude of the IED threat forced the Marines to patrol in a fundamentally different way than infantrymen patrol in most counterinsurgencies. As they had learned from Marines with prior experience in Helmand, the Taliban prepared ambush zones by emplacing IEDs in all the places where soldiers were likely to move when under fire. As a consequence, the Marines had to be much more cautious in employing traditional fire-and-maneuver tactics. They had to maneuver more slowly, or not at all. One observer commented, “All the conventional Marine Corps tactics of enveloping and closing with the enemy are impossible in this environment. Your only choice is to fight from current location due to threat of I.E.D.’s.”⁶⁵ Accuracy and potency of firepower became paramount. So did the ability to make creative use of cover, since the best cover was most often rigged with IEDs. The Marines proved capable of operating effectively under these constraints, inflicting much higher casualties on the enemy during firefights than they sustained themselves.

The prevalence of IEDs also kept the Marines from patrolling at night. The Marines’ night vision equipment did not provide adequate visibility to spot many of the telltale signs of IEDs, so night patrolling would have entailed many additional casualties, which could not be worth the benefits gained since the insurgents themselves seldom operated at night. Despite enormous U.S. expenditures on counter-IED technology, detection devices accounted for just ten percent of the IEDs that 3/5 detected and disarmed during its time in Sangin. That figure excluded IEDs that were reported to the Marines by the population, but in the first months the population reported very few IEDs because they supported the Taliban out of sympathy, opportunism, or fear. The insurgents had devised methods of constructing IEDs that even the most advanced devices could not detect. The Marines identified the other ninety percent by visual means—by spotting small clues that revealed a device or served as a warning sign to civilians to stay away. The ability of the Marines to see these IEDs was greatly enhanced by predeployment training programs that bolstered their situational awareness, particularly the Combat Hunter program, and those that enabled them to identify new enemy IED techniques, such as site exploitation.

The Marines used explosives to clear some of the areas most thickly infested with IEDs. They took care to ensure that no civilians were nearby before detonating the charges, but the damage to civilian property was significant, considerably more significant than what most adherents of “population-centric” counterinsurgency would have condoned. To clear roads that were pocked with IEDs, they detonated 350-foot line charges, each foot of which was laced with five pounds of C4 plastic explosive. The explosions from the line charges usually blew out the windows of nearby houses. In certain cases, the Marines destroyed abandoned roadside compounds that insurgents were using to implant IEDs, or blasted walls down to gain access to compounds when the entrances were rigged with IEDs. One company commander destroyed a mosque that had wires running to it.

The Marines paid compensation for most of the damage, or rebuilt the structures themselves, though they did back a new policy announced by the district governor that no compensation would be paid for damage to property whose owners were found to have abetted the insurgents. Compensation payments did not, however, halt the flow of complaints from Afghan civilians and foreign officials about the use of such tactics. In defense of the battalion’s actions, Morris told the Associated Press, “You can be nice about it and try to leave everything the way it is and allow the Taliban to own it, or you can change some things and actually plant the Afghan government flag out there and provide legitimate security.”⁶⁶

When in combat with insurgent fighters, the Marines went to great lengths to avoid harming civilians. Given that the IED threat greatly constrained their ability to maneuver around the battlefield, the logical military response to any attack would have been to employ overwhelming firepower. But the commanders on the ground knew that trigger-happiness could result in unjustifiable civilian casualties that would cause trouble with the local population and with President Karzai, who had made civilian casualties his principal means of exerting political pressure on the United States. They also had to abide by restrictions on the use of force handed down from above. If the Marines could not verify that a structure was devoid of civilian bystanders, they could not use heavy weapons, unless Marines were pinned

down by fire from the structure and unable to maneuver. Some of the Marines complained that the restrictions on firepower were too stringent, and prevented the killing of numerous insurgents, while others said they did not feel constrained. Some also said that higher headquarters launched too many investigations into the use of firepower, expending large amounts of manpower and engendering excessive reluctance to use firepower.

In the first months of the deployment, the Marines and the Afghan district governor received numerous complaints from civilians that Marine combat operations had caused damage to property or person. Some of these complaints reached President Karzai, who held them up as evidence of American wrongdoing before anyone had been able to check their accuracy. In the past, the inability or unwillingness of coalition personnel in Sangin to visit most sites of reported damage had compelled them to accept damage claims at face value. After Sangin's residents had seen the foreigners paying money to anyone who registered a complaint, they had submitted all manner of fraudulent claims, enriching themselves and the Taliban. The Taliban, moreover, had persuaded their friends and relatives, and coerced everyone else, to report bogus civilian casualties and beg the coalition to end combat operations.



U.S. Marine surveys a compound while conducting a reconnaissance patrol in Sangin, Afghanistan
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The Marines, having resolved to operate throughout Sangin, decided to visit the site of every claim before making any restitution. In some places, they discovered that the structures that had allegedly been damaged were actually untouched. They asked civilians when and where alleged casualties had occurred, then checked the claims against the meticulous records and surveillance footage they kept on all their operations. In all but a handful of cases, they found that no force had been used at the time and place of the reported incident. When the Marines began insisting that anyone making civilian casualty claims either bring the victim to a Marine base or direct the Marines to the compound where the victim was located, no one did either.⁶⁷ Over the

course of the battalion's seven-month deployment, Marine investigations identified only two incidents in which civilians were killed by fire from 3/5 Marines. In both instances, the Taliban had taken up firing positions in civilian compounds, forced the occupants to remain inside, and pinned down a Marine patrol with their fire, drawing return fire from Marines who were unaware of the presence of civilians.

Marine restraint, it should be noted, was not the only reason for the relative dearth of civilian casualties. Early on, the insurgents took care to avoid picking fights in the vicinity of civilians, because most of the insurgents were natives of Sangin and did not want their relatives getting killed. Where the insurgents enjoyed the support of most of the population, which at first meant most of Sangin, the insurgents could notify the population to vacate their homes in advance of operations without the fear that these civilians would tip off the enemy. As shall be seen, insurgent concerns about civilian casualties would dissipate later on as out-of-area fighters came into the district.

Although Afghan army and police officers accompanied many of the combined American-Afghan patrols, U.S. Marine platoon leaders or squad leaders led all of the patrols at first. For coalition forces in other areas of Afghanistan, the inclusion of partner Afghan forces in operations in this manner was often the sole means of partnership with the Afghan security forces. But the Marines of 3/5, like Marines elsewhere in Helmand, also detached some of their own men to serve as full-time advisers to the local Afghan army and police units. Because these advisers were focused exclusively on the Afghans, they could devote all their time and effort to improving the Afghans, whereas members of the partner unit had many other concerns that limited their ability to advise the Afghans. As experienced infantrymen, moreover, the Marine advisers offered valuable instruction and advice on basic military skills to the Afghans, which could not be said of coalition advisers in other parts of Afghanistan who did not come from the infantry.

When 3/5 began its intensive patrolling, Marine advisers played a significant role in persuading Afghan soldiers and policemen to accompany the Marine operations, which was no easy task because these Afghans had grown comfortable with the previous system, whereby they had avoided most of the district's high-danger areas. Advisers also played an important role in obtaining supplies for their Afghan units. The Marines could have fulfilled most Afghan logistical needs by bypassing the dysfunctional Afghan logistical system and going through the American supply system, but the advisers tried to get them to work through the Afghan system, in the interest of long-term logistical self-sufficiency. It proved to be excruciatingly difficult. The transmission of a supply request from Sangin to the Afghan depot in Lashkar Gah rarely resulted in provision of supplies. To get supplies moving, the adviser most often had to travel to the central depot himself, fill out the paperwork, supervise the Afghans as they loaded the items onto vehicles, and accompany the vehicles back to Sangin. Given such problems and the closeness of the partnering relationship between the Marines and the Afghans, the Marines ended up meeting many Afghan logistical needs from Marine stocks. Afghan reliance on the Americans did provide valuable leverage, as the Americans could threaten to withhold supplies when the Afghans dragged their feet on actions the Marines deemed important.

Lieutenant Colonel Morris spent half his time with Afghans, principally the district governor, the district police chief, the ANA battalion commander, and senior tribal leaders. Meetings with



Mohammed Shariffs, district governor of Sangin
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community leaders had to be restricted to the most influential individuals, because everyone wanted to meet with Morris on account of the money and weapons at his disposal, which were the greatest of any man in the district. His subordinate commanders met with lesser community leaders, and organized shuras with the communities in their areas of operation.

The Marines in Sangin benefited from efforts at higher echelons to promote good Afghan local leadership. Governor Mangal made the appointment of good district-level leadership a top priority, as he

believed, correctly, that in Helmand's recent past, "There were internal things that made people support the Taliban: weak administration, injustice, bad district governors."⁶⁸ For Sangin, Mangal had appointed Mohammed Sherif district governor in March 2010, having noticed the man's good performance as a district executive officer in Garmsir. A dedicated leader whose demeanor and advanced age endowed him with considerable moral authority, Sherif was committed to resolving disputes among the district's tribes and facilitating the reconciliation of the tribes with the government.⁶⁹ Sherif was a native of northern Helmand but his tribe, the Alizi, did not have a significant presence in Sangin and hence he could seem impartial and act impartially when it came to arbitrating the tribal disputes that the Taliban had exploited in their recruiting and administration of justice.

Soon after 3/5 arrived in Sangin, the Marines decided that the district executive officer was doing little except steering contracts to cronies who would pay him kickbacks, so General Mills began encouraging Mangal to replace him. Mangal was hesitant at first, as he did not want to invest most of his scarce human capital in an area where government officials lacked access to most of the population. In December, as the situation in Sangin improved, Mangal relieved the district executive officer and sent a reasonably good technocrat to take his place. The new executive officer promptly jumpstarted governance initiatives that had languished under his predecessor. Over the course of the 3/5 deployment, American prodding and encouraging at the regional and national levels also resulted in the replacement of two weak ANA company commanders with strong army officers, resulting in much better ANA performance in Sangin.

The heavy casualties that 3/5 incurred in October and November led to considerable scrutiny from higher authorities, who flew by helicopter to Sangin to check on the situation for themselves. After examining the local conditions and the activities of 3/5, they concluded that the battalion had the right approach, but could benefit from additional resources. The Regional Command sent additional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, and additional vehicles for moving supplies. To permit further intensification of patrolling, the Regional Command dispatched K company of 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines to Sangin in November,

and E company of 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines in December. The former provided reinforcements at the patrol bases, freeing up more 3/5 Marines for patrols, while the latter took charge of its own area in southern Sangin. Morris now commanded seven companies, with approximately 1500 Marines, under a reinforced 3/5.



U.S. Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Joseph Osterman

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During November, the Marine division commander, Brigadier General Joseph L. Osterman, sent a 200-man Marine reconnaissance battalion to the Upper Sangin Valley, just north of the 3/5 area of operations. The intensive patrolling of 3/5 had compelled the insurgents to seek a new safe haven, and the Upper Sangin

Valley was the most convenient place. Shortly after the reconnaissance battalion arrived, hordes of insurgents attempted to overwhelm them in major combat, and were soundly thrashed. Several hundred insurgents perished.

The resource augmentation did not include additional special operations forces (SOF). Morris believed that his Marines had the intelligence information and operational capabilities to handle the enemies they faced. The Marines cooperated with SOF that worked in the area, but 3/5 ended up eliminating more high-value individuals (HVIs) in Sangin than SOF did because they interacted more frequently with the population and conducted more operations that either eliminated HVIs or garnered information that led them to HVIs. Most of these HVIs were members of the Quetta Shura Taliban, but a small number belonged to other Islamic militant groups based in Pakistan. Although no Al Qaeda were present in Sangin, they easily could have gone there from Pakistan and operated there as easily as the other HVIs prior to the arrival of 3/5.

On occasion, the Marines did benefit from external assistance with insurgent leaders. On November 20, 2010, an American airstrike killed Mullah Abdul Qayoum, the Taliban's shadow governor and military commander for Sangin district.⁷⁰ This man's replacement was not as capable or respected, and as a consequence the Taliban experienced a degradation of political and military capabilities.

Because of the high rate at which 3/5 was suffering casualties, higher headquarters encouraged General Mills to withdraw the battalion from Sangin for a period of physical and psychological recuperation. Mills and Morris both rejected the proposal. The Marines of 3/5 said that they wanted to finish what they had started, and Mills and Morris thought that pulling them out in the middle of the struggle would be the most demoralizing action possible. Morale and psychiatric health remained very good across the battalion. The psychiatrists and medics who assessed 3/5 in the field saw no need to evacuate any of the Marines for post-traumatic stress during the deployment, and only two Marines were evacuated for other psychiatric reasons, both of whom had suffered from psychiatric problems prior to the deployment. After the tour, a small fraction of 3/5 Marines would be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress, giving the battalion a PTS rate comparable to that of other U.S. units recently returned from combat, few of which had experienced comparable levels of trauma.

January 2011 witnessed a sharp drop in insurgent attacks, the result of insurgent casualties and insurgent supply problems caused by Marine operations. During the month, local insurgent commanders sought permission from the Taliban leadership in Pakistan to pull out of Sangin. Permission was denied. The Taliban high command decided instead to inject commanders and fighters who were natives of Pakistan or other parts of Afghanistan. Because of either a lack of will or lack of capability, however, the new arrivals did not engage the Marines with the intensity witnessed during the battalion's first months. For the remainder of the Marine battalion's tour, the insurgents relied mainly on IEDs to hinder and hurt the Marines and their Afghan partners.

While the existence of sanctuaries in Pakistan enabled the insurgents to replenish their forces in Sangin and many other districts of southern and eastern Afghanistan, the replacements were handicapped by their outsider status. The Taliban had thrived in Sangin from 2006 to the 2010 under the leadership of men who were native to the area, which had given the Taliban great advantages in obtaining the support of a population that remained deeply attached to its families, tribes, and villages, and suspicious of people who did not belong to those circles. Sensitive information that they would give to a Taliban commander from their tribe would not be given to a newcomer from Pakistan or Kandahar.



Afghan villagers in Sangin, Afghanistan

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The insurgents operating outside their own communities did not see eye-to-eye with homegrown insurgents on the need to protect the civilian population from harm. If a counterinsurgent patrol suddenly appeared while an insurgent was eating dinner with his relatives, the insurgent was likely to leave the patrol alone to ensure the safety of his

relatives. An outsider, on the other hand, had fewer qualms about attacking the Americans while civilians were nearby, and was more likely to relish the advantages to be gained under such circumstances—the presence of civilians inhibited the counterinsurgents’ return fire, and casualties suffered by the civilians could be exploited in anti-American propaganda. Civilian casualties did indeed rise sharply in Sangin after external personnel took on leading roles in the insurgency. Frictions among insurgents over the exposure of civilians to violence helped account for the reports the Americans began to receive in January that Taliban members in Sangin were killing each other.⁷¹

The influx of outside elements into the insurgent leadership was one of several factors responsible for the decline in popular support for Sangin’s insurgents that became evident in

January. Others included the heavy costs of war to families that supported the insurgents, the repeated insurgent military defeats, and a shift in U.S. policy pronouncements from emphasis on a 2011 drawdown to a 2014 transition. The allure of foreign development aid for those supporting the government also exerted influence, which was intensified when Governor Mangal brought some of Sangin's elders into other parts of Helmand to see what they were missing.

The most dramatic change in allegiance came from the Alikozai tribe, which had borne the brunt of the losses during the fighting in the Upper Sangin Valley. At the beginning of January, following negotiations with Morris and the Afghan district and provincial governors, leading figures of the Alikozai reached a peace agreement with the government. Under the terms, the Alikozai would stop fighting the Marines and the Afghan security forces, hand over IEDs and foreign fighters, provide representatives for a district governance council, and keep open the road to Kajaki. In return, the Americans would provide development aid and ensure that Afghans participate in any home searches involving the Marines. The Alikozai did not have to turn over their weapons, and they vowed to return to violence if the Americans and the government did not hold up their end of the bargain.

A few days after the pact was sealed, one of the Alikozai Taliban commanders who had consented to the agreement told a British journalist, "I saw that fighting wouldn't fix Afghanistan. We were fighting for the freedom of our people, but the people themselves came to us and said they were suffering from the fighting and they didn't have any freedom. They said losing sons and daughters and relatives every day was not freedom, so they asked us to make a deal with the government."⁷² Other Alikozai leaders told the Marines of 3/5 that the heavy insurgent casualties and the numerous military defeats, in Sangin and other parts of Helmand, were the primary reasons for the tribe's change of heart. The extension of the U.S. commitment in 2014 and the prosperity of the populace in government-controlled areas were important, but secondary, reasons.

A number of Afghan officials and foreign diplomats declared proudly that the reconciliation of the Alikozai resulted primarily from the promise of development aid. The Marines found this claim absurd, as it glossed over the fact that the Marines had made the aid conditional on reciprocal action in contravention of civilian recommendations, and it ignored the fact that lavish development spending had done nothing to gain the people's support during the period of population-centric COIN. In their view, the insistence on reciprocity gave the development aid whatever influence it did exert, which could not have been very large because the Alikozai's narcotics profits left them with little need for money. "You can't just convince them through projects and goodwill," one Marine officer commented. "You have to show up at their door with two companies of Marines and start killing people. That's how you start convincing them."⁷³

It is also worth noting that reconciliation had occurred despite the lack of major progress in governance or development. The insistence of the Marines on reciprocity had halted most development projects. A handful of new development projects had been started in the town, but when the insurgents killed a few of the Afghan workers, the remainder quit. Efforts to develop governance capacity also accomplished little during the first months of the deployment. The presence of a bad district executive officer inhibited governance during this period, and the district governor did not have other staff to whom he could delegate tasks. In addition, Afghan civil servants in Kabul and Lashkar Gah refused to come to Sangin because of the perilous conditions, and when the DST tried to hire locals to serve in the district administration, no one responded to their employment announcements. The only major accomplishment of the district administration was the interaction between the district governor and some of the local elites.

Within a few days of the pact with the Alikozai, the Taliban killed one of the tribal leaders who had brokered it. They shot another in the leg outside his home. Nevertheless, most of the Alikozai lived up to their end of the deal in the ensuing weeks and months. It has held since that

time, and is now viewed as an exemplar for peace deals with other communities across Afghanistan.

Although Sangin's other tribes did not strike deals with the government at this time, they did become less hostile to the Marines and the government, and civilians in much of Sangin began cooperating with the Marines and the Afghan government in one way or another. During the first months of 2011, the population gave the Marines far more tips than before on the location of IEDs. These tips, along with the attrition of skilled insurgent bomb-makers and heightened Marine familiarity with the enemy's IED techniques, resulted in a sharp increase in IED finds in early 2011. As IED finds went up, American and ANSF casualties went down, which had a demoralizing effect on the insurgents, who kept close eye on medical evacuation helicopters to see how many counterinsurgents they had harmed. The insurgents did, however, continue to plant many IEDs and intimidate the population through the month of January. When a squad of Marines tried to persuade the head of one household to visit the town to claim money for a door the Marines destroyed, he replied, "There are Taliban on the roads. They will beat or kill me. If I go to the town for money from you, they will hang me by the neck."⁷⁴

The level of insurgent activity plunged again in February. Of the 29 killed and 200 wounded that 3/5 and its attached units sustained during their seven months in Sangin, the vast majority came prior to February 2011. The extent to which additional insurgent casualties and shifts in popular support during January and February contributed to the reduction in insurgent activity is unclear. Sangin's Taliban fighters have traditionally cut back their operations in February in order to participate in labor-intensive poppy cultivation. Violence has remained at low levels from February until the completion of harvesting in May, at which point the farmers have spare time again and the insurgents have cash from poppy sales to pay fighters. Whatever the cause of the insurgency's quietude, the Marines intended to take advantage of it by solidifying the Afghan security forces and expanding Afghan governance.

Intelligence reports indicated that the Taliban intended to reinforce Sangin and resume intensive operations when the poppy season ended. In early March, Morris told a reporter, “Taliban leaders in Pakistan have called commanders back and chewed them out, saying ‘Go back up there and be a man and get your jihad on.’” The Taliban, Morris said, were preparing to attack with several hundred men come May. “I will tell you they’re going to have a real hard time doing that,” Morris remarked. “The progress that we’ve made in the last three months has allowed us to expand to the point where patrol bases, combat outposts, and patrols of partnered ISAF and ANSF forces are going to meet them at every turn.”⁷⁵

By this time, the number of Marine patrol bases had risen from 11 to 22, the number the British had been operating when they departed. Most of the additions were new bases in areas beyond the town, on ground held previously by the enemy. Three of them, however, were former British bases that 3/7 had closed. The Marines of 3/5 reopened them because the reduced insurgent activity lowered the number of troops required for patrolling, and because experience had shown that these bases were more valuable than had been anticipated. “It’s a tough balance because if you just occupy bases, you can’t do enough patrols,” said Captain Matthew Peterson, commander of Lima company. “But if you just patrol, you don’t have constant overwatch.”⁷⁶



U.S. Marine Corps Captain Matthew Peterson Sangin District, Afghanistan
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The diversion of manpower to base security was partially offset by the infusion of additional ANSF. By the spring, Regional Command-Southwest increased the number of Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) in Sangin by bringing in policemen from elsewhere in Helmand. In the fall of 2010, the AUP had

done no patrolling beyond their checkpoints, but now they were patrolling up to 1000 meters from the checkpoints and were accompanying all of the Marine patrols in the populous sections of the district. Two hundred members of the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) moved

from Marjah to Sangin, although these policemen were hindered by weak leadership and lack of personnel native to Helmand. Like the Afghan army, ANCOP had many men who were not Pashtuns and could not speak Pashto, the local tongue, so they were usually employed in sparsely populated areas. By April, Afghans were leading one third of all combined Marine-Afghan patrols, and some Afghan units were conducting meaningful operations on their own.

Afghan intelligence capabilities also showed improvement. Afghan policemen and soldiers developed a considerable number of human intelligence sources who provided accurate information on IEDs and insurgents. The Afghan police and army, however, still had considerable difficulty telling the insurgents apart from the population. The Marines of 3/5 detained more than 100 insurgents during their tour, despite the need to satisfy stringent evidence requirements, whereas the AUP detained only a dozen suspected insurgents in the same period. Only a small fraction of the detainees received lengthy prison sentences from the Afghan judicial system, because Sangin had no judge or prosecutor on account of the security situation, and because some detainees achieved release through bribery. The National Directorate of Security, a clandestine arm of the Afghan government, rounded up an unknown number of insurgents.

The improved security situation permitted the district governor to fill twelve civil service vacancies. Educational requirements for these positions had to be lowered when it became clear that the Afghans with the preferred educational levels all lived in Lashkar Gah, Kabul, or other cities and had no interest in working in a place like Sangin. Local recruitment, however, brought the valuable advantages of local knowledge and personal connections. The district governor convinced representatives from Sangin's main tribes to participate in a 25-man district governance council that had a significant voice in the running of the district's affairs.

Now that Afghan and American leaders could go into every community, they took the opportunity to hold shuras and small meetings in which they swayed the people through force of personality and appeals to reason and passion. The district governor stood up before elders

to declare poppy anti-Islamic, beseech them to set aside their tribal differences, and exhort them to turn against the insurgents. His personality and reputation played a major role in changing the minds of the local elites. “I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the district governor to reintegration efforts,” said Morris. “The locals and the Taliban would not have talked if they didn't trust him.”



U.S. Marines speak with Afghan elders while on patrol in Sangin, Afghanistan
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The local Afghan Army commander, Lt. Col. Najrabi Wadood, told one shura, “If the leaders of the Taliban are so righteous and brave, why do they stay in Pakistan and hire your sons to fight us?” The Afghan police chief, Colonel Ghully Khan, elicited laughter by saying, “The Taliban hide like women. When they see the Afghan army and police coming, they put on the burqa!” At gatherings of elders whose villages continued abetting the Taliban, Morris announced that the international community could provide new schools, roads, and clinics if the violence stopped. “Go back to your villages, talk to your people, and ask them what they want,” he said to one group. “Do they want progress, do they want education, do they want health? Do they want a future? Or do they want to continue to fight and continue to have all these things drained away from your fertile land and go down to people in Pakistan who don't care about you? If the insurgents want to fight, we are very good at fighting, and we will fight until we leave this place. But this is not what we want to do.”⁷⁷

The spring saw the first Marine recruitment of local self-defense forces, through the Interim Security for Critical Infrastructure (ISCI) program. The district police chief used CERP funds to pay ISCI members for non-military work, and in return they provided information and armed resistance to Taliban intrusion. Many Sangin residents said they wanted to participate in the program, but most of them demanded weapons, and, when the Marines said that ISCI recruits

needed to use their own weapons, declared implausibly that they had none. As a consequence, only six men entered the program initially.

Insurgent activity remained low to the end of the 3/5 deployment in April. In the final weeks, the IED threat reached such a low point that the Marines and the Afghans began patrolling at night. Lance Cpl. Zachary Stangle, an engineer, observed, "The beginning was horrible. It was so bad here. You'd step outside the wire and five minutes later you'd start getting shot at, you'd see one of your buddies get hit by an IED. But now, you hardly have to worry anymore. There are far less IEDs, far less firefights, far less Taliban in general."⁷⁸

The big question was how strong and active the insurgents would be in May when the poppy season ended. The battalion that replaced 3/5 in April, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, continued counterinsurgency operations along the same lines as those of 3/5. April and May were quiet in Sangin, with the Marines sustaining only a handful of casualties. The gains that 3/5 achieved in security, governance, and development are holding as of this writing, in late June 2011. All of the major tribes in Sangin are now participating in governmental programs that promote local governance. Rapport between Afghan security forces and the population is much improved; even those individuals with lingering insurgent sympathies are showing the Afghan forces respect, by directing their acts of violence at the U.S. Marines instead of at Afghan soldiers and policemen.

During June, 1/5 pushed out beyond the boundaries that 3/5 had held, in order to expand the security bubble and eliminate insurgents who were biting the bubble's edges. The Marines have clashed repeatedly with insurgent forces, sustaining several fatalities. As of June 24, a total of five Marines from 1/5 had been killed since the battalion's arrival in April.⁷⁹ A British reporter who visited Sangin late in June wrote that "the gun battles and roadside blasts that once took place in Sangin's heart have migrated to its fringes – and it's hard to see that as anything but a vindication of the Marines' aggressive tactics."⁸⁰

Transition

Although the Lisbon conference of November 2010 eased some of the pressure on ISAF for rapid transition of security to the Afghan government, the troop withdrawal plan announced by President Obama on June 22, 2011 ensures that transition will be a top priority for ISAF from here on. Prior Marine successes in Nawa and other Helmand districts have made Helmand a focal point of ISAF transition planning. In November 2010, the Marines said they planned to transition Nawa's security to the Afghans by mid-2011, 24 months after the Marines had first arrived in the district, but the Marines would still retain a large presence in the district center to advise the Afghans, provide quick-reaction forces, and interdict insurgents. "If the people feel you've left them early, and the Taliban exacts revenge, we'll never get them back," explained Colonel David Furness, the regimental commander overseeing Nawa. "There are a lot of people in Nawa who have voted with their lives. We owe them security." Most of Nawa's residents feared that insecurity would return to the district if the Marines departed in haste.⁸¹

Civilian critics alleged that the continuing Marine presence envisioned by these plans contradicted the U.S. military's claims that it could transition secured areas in 24 months. Military planners responded that transition did not mean complete U.S. departure. What exactly transition will ultimately mean has yet to be decided. If U.S. combat forces depart at the end 2014, U.S. advisers and support troops may remain in large numbers. The Afghan security forces, especially the police, will still need their services.

Like the residents of Nawa in late 2010, Sangin's inhabitants in June 2011 are worried that a hasty American departure from their district will undo the positive changes to the military and political landscape. One of Sangin's tribal elders told a foreign journalist in late June that "if the American Marines leave Sangin district, then it will be like before, when the British were here, and the Taliban will capture most of the district."⁸² In Sangin, transition faces additional obstacles that were not present in Nawa. Sangin's population has had deeper ties to the

Taliban, and its strong tribal rivalries complicate efforts to achieve lasting community consensus on the distribution of power. Sangin does, however, have some of the ingredients essential to effective transition and lasting success—a very good provincial governor, a good district governor, a competent if not very vigorous police chief, and a substantial number of trained policemen and civil servants. In addition, the Afghan security forces have robust advisory teams composed of U.S. Marine infantrymen, and they have learned firsthand how insurgents can be beaten. If these pieces remain in place in Sangin, the outlook for transition is reasonably good. But even with them, transition will require skillful balancing of the competing interests of Sangin’s tribes and power brokers, many of which remain deeply involved in the drug trade. Maintaining stability may prove incompatible with poppy eradication within the time frame stipulated for transition.

The time required for a successful transition in Sangin and other districts in Helmand could be shortened appreciably by influencing a number of external factors, including the effectiveness of counterinsurgency operations in neighboring districts and provinces, pressure on insurgent leaders residing in Pakistan, the expansion of local self-defense programs like ISCI and ALP, and the ability of U.S. policymakers to persuade Afghans that transition does not mean abandonment. An effective U.S. strategy for the region must exert positive influence on all



Governor Gulab Mangal, governor of Helmand

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these factors.

Circumstances and decisions by various parties could also give rise to several developments that would facilitate the acceleration of transition. One of these developments would be a greater degree of reconciliation in Helmand, which could

come about as the result of war fatigue among the population or the local insurgent leadership, the improved character of the Afghan government, or events in Pakistan. Another would be the proliferation of truces between the Afghan security forces and the Taliban. Other developments

could prolong the time required for effective transition, such as the replacement of Governor Mangal with a bad leader or a return of the perception that the United States is cutting and running.

Keys to the Success of

3rd Battalion 5th Marines in Sangin

- 1. The Marines combined population-centric and enemy-centric methods.** Previous coalition forces in Sangin had focused on either enemy-centric COIN or population-centric COIN and had failed to suppress the insurgency. The 3rd Battalion 5th Marines made extensive use of methods from both of these COIN schools. Their aggressive security operations included operations aimed at destroying enemy fighters and logistics, operations aimed at securing the population, and some that did both. The enemy-centric operations gained them the initiative, deprived the enemy of safe havens where they could rest and reorganize, and gave Afghan officials the freedom of movement required to interact with local elites and conduct basic governance activities across the entire area of operations. The insurgent casualties resulting from these operations weakened the enemy, reduced the willingness of the population to support the insurgents, and forced the insurgency to replace the fallen with outsiders who did not enjoy the respect of the population. The population-centric security operations prevented the insurgents from intimidating and exploiting the population and built popular confidence in the Marines. The slackening of insurgent activity after several months of intense fighting permitted the Marines to conduct fewer enemy-centric operations and more population-centric operations, but some enemy-centric operations continued during the “hold” and “build” phases, in order to prevent the enemy from regrouping in the less populous areas of the district.

- 2. Military successes stimulated reconciliation and population mobilization.** The population-centric COIN that preceded the Marines had relied on political outreach and economic development to convince Sangin's residents to abandon the insurgency and join the government side. Military force was minimized based on the theory that violence would create "accidental guerrillas," kill off potential negotiating partners, and alienate the insurgents so much that they would never consider reconciling with the government. This approach accomplished little. In fact, the counterinsurgents' aversion to the use of force and their eagerness to negotiate most likely discouraged a political compromise because they suggested that the insurgents could win a complete victory by waiting the foreigners out. As it turned out, the Marines made much greater progress in reconciliation and population mobilization because their military successes raised the costs in lives and property that communities and families paid for supporting the insurgency and convinced the opportunists that the coalition would prevail.
- 3. The Marines put stabilization ahead of transition.** Preceding military commanders and civilian officials had sought to facilitate transition by assigning greater responsibility to Afghans. The Marines concluded that the enemy was too strong and the Afghan government too weak to permit a successful transition under these conditions. Instead, they decided to take the lead in security operations in order to set the conditions for ultimate success. By reducing violence and permitting government officials freedom of movement, they put the government on a viable path to sustainable transition. This shift in approach mirrored the shift in Iraq in 2006 and 2007, when initial efforts to transition responsibility to Iraqis failed so spectacularly that the Americans chose to retake the lead in security until the situation stabilized. In both instances, a de-emphasis on transition actually improved the prospects for transition and shortened the amount of time required for a successful handover.
- 4. The district and provincial governors were capable and dedicated.** Sangin had a good district governor, and the provincial governor was one of the best in the country. Unlike

some Afghan governors, they were deeply committed to advancing the welfare of the population and defeating the insurgents. In seeking to quell tribal disputes that abetted the Taliban, they could serve as honest brokers because they did not preside over their own tribes. Their actions and their interpersonal skills enabled them to gain the confidence of local elites and convince them that the government was no longer the predatory entity it used to be, which helped turn many of these elites away from the insurgents. Without such governors, promotion of community self-government and self-defense through programs like ALP and ISCI will be constrained by lack of connectivity to the central government, which will upset Karzai and impede transition.

5. **The Marines and Afghans patrolled at high rates.** By conducting patrols at a rate that doubled or tripled that of other units, 3/5 and its Afghan partners exerted the influence of much larger forces. At a time of dwindling foreign troop strengths, getting maximum productivity from coalition battalions is imperative.
6. **Coalition forces persisted as casualties mounted.** The U.S. Marine leadership, at several levels, refused to reduce the amount of aggressive foot patrolling following initial losses that were large by the standards of the Afghan war. By accepting high casualty levels early on, they were able to establish a dominant position that resulted in far fewer casualties for them and for future units. The charisma, resilience, and competence of the officers and NCOs of 3/5 sustained morale and minimized psychiatric casualties in the face of the fatalities and serious injuries. Elsewhere in Afghanistan, heavy casualties have caused coalition commanders to reduce the intensity of patrolling, shift from foot patrolling to vehicular patrolling, or withdraw from the area. Although these commanders usually reduced the casualties in the short term, they left the enemy with control of the population and the strength to inflict casualties and outlast coalition forces. Trading higher short-term casualties for lower long-term casualties will improve prospects for transition, not only by bolstering the security situation but also by

reducing political pressure in the United States in 2012 and 2013 for troop withdrawals beyond those announced by President Obama in his June 22 speech.

- 7. Weak U.S. leadership was not tolerated.** The willingness of the battalion commander to relieve officers and NCOs resulted in substantial improvements in performance. Ideally, leadership deficiencies are identified prior to deployment, but the experience of 3/5 and many other units has shown that some individuals who seem acceptable leaders in predeployment training will come up short once they enter the war, no matter what coaching they receive from their superiors. Too often, coalition forces have been unwilling to relieve poor commanders, because of a commander's investment in the individual's development, personal sympathy for the individual, or a desire not to rock the boat.
- 8. Weak Afghan leadership was not tolerated.** At the outset, the Afghan government suffered from a bad district executive officer and some weak Afghan National Army company commanders. With persistence, pressure, and force of personality, the Marines lobbied with senior Afghan authorities to replace the poor Afghan leaders and succeeded in effecting their relief. These changes yielded sharp increases in the quality of the district administration and the army forces, and saved Afghan and American lives. Such changes are also critical for transition, for its success hinges on the presence of capable Afghan leaders.
- 9. Development aid was made conditional on support from local elites.** The Marines discontinued the prior practice of delivering development aid unconditionally across the district, a practice that had failed to create the gratitude or stimulate the interest in reconciliation that its implementers had forecasted. Instead, the Marines told communities that they would receive the aid only if they provided support in a tangible manner, such as identifying IEDs or ending insurgent attacks on Marine patrols. The

allure of aid helped convince some communities to abandon the Taliban, though it was secondary in importance to security in this regard.

10. Development aid was provided only when coalition personnel could visit the projects.

The Marines stopped the funding of development projects in areas that could not be visited. This shift ensured that coalition personnel could verify firsthand whether projects were proceeding as intended, and disabused Afghans of the notion that the coalition was a collection of suckers. The Marine willingness to operate throughout the district greatly facilitated on-site inspections.

11. The policy decision to extend NATO’s commitment through the end of 2014 had significant, although not decisive, influence on the population’s political alignment.

Prior to the Lisbon conference of November 2010, most Helmand residents had believed that the Americans were leaving Afghanistan in 2011. The U.S. government had announced the start of a major drawdown in 2011, not the end of it, but that subtlety was not conveyed effectively to the Afghan people. Taliban propaganda that emphasized the reported 2011 American drawdown helped convince fence-sitters that support for the government was foolhardy. The decision at Lisbon to maintain NATO responsibilities for security to the end of 2014 provided an effective counter to this Taliban propaganda and contributed to the decision of Sangin tribes to abandon the insurgents, though it was not as influential as the changes in the local security environment.

12. Afghan partner forces were integrated into all operations. The integration of Afghan military or police personnel into all Marine operations imposed significant costs on the Marines in terms of labor, as they had to provide extensive coaching to these personnel, who were often very short on training and experience. The Marines also increased the risks to themselves, for partner forces had, on occasion, opened fire on American and other NATO forces. The benefits, however, outweighed the costs and risks. Partnering

developed the confidence and proficiency of Afghan forces and ensured that they participated in useful activities. The presence of Afghans with U.S. Marines facilitated the Marines' communication with the population, increased their access to information, and showed the population that the representatives of the Afghan government, not just the Americans, were combating the insurgents.

13. The Marine battalion assigned its own personnel as full-time advisers to the Afghan

army and police. The ISAF emphasis on partnering during 2010 resulted in the elimination of advisory teams to most ANA and some ANP units, on the theory that partner units could fulfill all the functions of advisers. Unfortunately, some coalition units have taken partnering less seriously than others, and partner units have generally provided less assistance to Afghan forces than full-time advisers because of their other obligations. The desire to achieve results quickly has, at times, led coalition forces to focus on doing the hard work themselves and to neglect the development of Afghan forces. Marine units in Afghanistan have rectified these problems by allocating Marines to both Afghan army and Afghan police units for full-time advisory duty. The fact that the Marine advisers in Sangin came from an infantry battalion gave them a major advantage over the many advisers from other services who have not had infantry backgrounds. The fact that the advisers of 3/5 belonged to the infantry battalion with whom their counterparts were partnered gave the American battalion commander command authority over the advisers, which eliminated the possibility of disharmony between the commander and the advisory team.

14. Counternarcotics took a back seat to stabilization. The Marines decided that they had too many enemies already to engage in large-scale counternarcotics activities. Much of the population depended on the opium industry for its livelihood, and could be expected to cling to insurgency more strongly if that livelihood were at stake. Counternarcotics could wait until the government had enough personnel and adequate security to undertake robust counternarcotics measures. Marine COIN operations did,

however, have a large impact on the narcotics trade because many of the insurgents they captured or killed had been involved in it. Nevertheless, the narcotics industry continues to thrive in Sangin, and it now poses a vexing problem across Helmand, for the power brokers required for reconciliation, and at some level the officials of the Afghan government, are deeply invested in it will strongly resist actions that would harm the narcotics business.

15. Some civilian property was damaged deliberately in order to protect friendly forces.

The Marines rejected the argument that damage to civilian property necessarily increased support for the insurgents, and believed that in some cases it undermined support for the insurgents by increasing the costs paid by their supporters, most of whom were more concerned about their family's well-being than the ideological aims of the insurgents. Consequently, the Marines at times destroyed civilian structures laden with IEDs and directed air strikes onto civilian homes harboring insurgents, in order to limit friendly casualties. They did, however, go to great lengths to avoid using destructive measures when civilians were present, which, together with the insurgency's own efforts to keep civilians away from violence, held civilian casualties down. In addition, the Marines paid compensation to property owners for damage, unless they were found to have abetted the insurgents. The overall decline in support for the insurgents in late 2010 and early 2011 lends credence to the Marine view that damaging civilian property did not necessarily create new enemies.

16. Civilian casualty and damage claims were paid only when they could be verified

firsthand. The Marines ended the practice of paying compensation to anyone who claimed civilian casualties or property damage, insisting that claimants bring them concrete evidence or direct them to it. Among the many advantages conferred by the Marine willingness to operate throughout the district was the ability to visit all sites of alleged civilian casualties and property damage. As the Marines quickly discovered, greed and Taliban pressure had spawned numerous bogus claims. The ability to disprove

these claims undercut the Taliban's propaganda and Karzai's complaints, and ended the flow of compensation money to fraudulent claimants who were in cahoots with the enemy.

17. General-Purpose Forces mobilized local self-defense forces. Through the ISCI program, general-purpose Marine forces recruited and organized self-defense personnel in Sangin, albeit not in the numbers seen in other districts of Helmand. In addition, the Marine battalion commander in Sangin negotiated a deal that convinced a major tribe to stop fighting the Marines, participate in the government, and keep out-of-area insurgents out of their area. With U.S. special operations forces lacking the manpower to provide all of the coalition forces required to support the rapid growth of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) program and other population mobilization programs, general-purpose forces can and should become more involved in these programs.

18. Information operations focused on simple themes that appealed to the people's self-interest. Marine information operations emphasized the successes of the coalition across Helmand, the inevitability of the Afghan government's victory, the costs of supporting the insurgents, and the benefits of supporting the government. Playing to the survivor's mentality of most rural Afghans, they invoked counterinsurgent military victories across Helmand as evidence that the counterinsurgents would prevail. When communicating with local elites, the Marines stressed that support for the government would result in development money for their villages, while support for the insurgents would result in combat that would kill insurgent fighters and put villages at risk. They showcased other districts of Helmand in which the population was prospering as a result of foreign largesse. Of course, these messages owed most of their effectiveness to the success of Marine military activities, because actions speak much louder than words in COIN. They also depended on the interpersonal skills of local Afghan and American leaders, for the civilian population was very attentive to messages delivered in person and had little or no access to modern media. Strategic messages coming from Kabul or

Washington had little impact, with the important exception of the Lisbon conference's decision to maintain NATO's lead security role through the end of 2014.

19. Most IED finds were the result of visual detection. Although the United States enjoyed great technological advantages over its Afghan adversaries, the insurgents proved capable of manufacturing thousands of IEDs that could not be detected by the most sophisticated American equipment. Consequently, ninety percent of the IEDs that 3/5 and its Afghan partners detected on their own were spotted by Marine or Afghan eyes. Non-technological training programs that enhanced the ability of coalition and Afghan personnel to identify the IEDs visually proved more valuable than technological solutions.

Relevance of Sangin to the rest of Afghanistan



An Afghan boy rides a mule past U.S. Marines conducting a patrol in Sangin, Afghanistan
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Sangin was one of the most difficult places in Afghanistan to combat insurgents, owing to the unusual depth of popular support for the insurgents, especially among the Ishaqzai tribe, and the presence of bountiful insurgent financing flowing from the opium trade. All of Sangin's tribes were hostile to outsiders,

including Pashtuns from elsewhere in Afghanistan, and had deep stakes in the narcotics industry. If the insurgents can be defeated in Sangin, they can be defeated anywhere.

The counterinsurgency principles and methods employed in Sangin have broad applicability across Afghanistan. Some principles and methods will be more appropriate at certain times and places than others and hence will have to be tailored to local conditions. For instance, in a district where the insurgents are considerably weaker than in Sangin, governance and

development work can proceed more rapidly. Where the Afghan security forces are stronger and district governance is more robust, coalition forces can take a less active role in security and governance.

The principles and methods employed in Sangin have already been implemented across much of Helmand province, which helps explain why Helmand has enjoyed greater security improvements in the past year than any other province. Since becoming the ISAF commander, General Petraeus has pushed many of these same principles and methods to units across Afghanistan, having recognized that some coalition forces had become too closely wed to population-centric COIN and were not paying sufficient attention to the enemy. This shift in emphasis has had a major impact on many U.S. Army units. In some provinces, however, coalition forces still disregard some or all of these principles, because of risk aversion, poor judgment, national political constraints, or strict adherence to either population-centric or enemy-centric COIN. In addition, some forces lack the necessary skill or vigor in their security operations, their partnering, or their support of governance. Coalition leaders, from the ISAF level on down, must instill the right principles in subordinate elements of all services and nationalities and monitor them to make sure that their commanders are adhering to them to the fullest extent permitted by their national governments.

It is not necessary to devote large numbers of troops to leader-centric COIN in every district of Afghanistan, even in the predominantly Pashtun provinces where the insurgents are concentrated. The pacification of one district can make it easier to pacify others, because fence-sitting Afghan elites become less inclined to support the insurgents when they learn of insurgent defeats in neighboring districts. The threat of imposing the Sangin solution may in itself convince some communities to support the government, much as the threat of force and the occasional application of force kept Afghan communities in line in earlier times. In the provinces where the insurgents are strongest, however, it may be advisable to undertake robust leader-centric operations in most or all districts, because when the insurgents are driven from one district they often seek refuge in districts that the counterinsurgents have not pacified

and employ them to stage attacks into adjoining districts. Such has been the case in Helmand. The clearing of Marjah and Musa Qala drove insurgents to Sangin; the operations of 3/5 caused insurgents to migrate to the Upper Sangin Valley; and the ejection of insurgents from the Upper Sangin Valley caused them to shift still further from the district's center, to Kajaki. The magnitude of this problem will, however, be reduced by using enemy-centric methods to deplete the enemy ranks in the initial districts, as was done in Sangin and was not done in Marjah.

COIN is troop-intensive, and ISAF and the Afghan government do not have enough troops to execute it properly in all of the districts that would benefit from it. The coming drawdown of foreign forces will reduce the strength of coalition infantry, though the growth in Afghan forces should offset these reductions in quantity, if not entirely in quality. In recognition of these realities, the International Joint Command has allocated security resources based on a prioritization of districts that is based, in large, on proximity to the ring road. Districts that are relatively far from the ring road, such as Kajaki, are generally less useful to the insurgents because of their distance from heavily populated areas, administrative centers, strategic roads, commercial enterprises, and terrorist safe havens in Pakistan. The sooner that coalition forces execute robust leader-centric COIN in the high priority districts, the better.

Shifting the bulk of U.S. forces in Afghanistan from COIN to counterterrorism (CT) would reduce American casualties in the near term but would squander the gains in security and governance that the coalition and the Afghan government made in the past year at great cost, and would forfeit the opportunity to make additional gains. Afghan forces are not yet ready to take charge of security in most of these areas, and any signaling of reduced U.S. commitment



U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Jason L. Morris in Sangin, Helmand province, Afghanistan
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would further lower Afghan capabilities by demoralizing Afghan leaders. Under such circumstances, the long-term prospects for preventing a Taliban reconquest of Afghanistan would be greatly diminished.

An American shift to a CT posture in Afghanistan would immediately increase the likelihood of international terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland. Withdrawing American forces from the intensive patrolling of COIN would decrease access to CT intelligence sources, discourage potential sources from providing information, and facilitate enemy surveillance operations that would provide advance warning of American CT raids. It would also deprive small CT bases of the security required in dangerous locations near the Pakistani border. Lieutenant Colonel Morris said of Sangin, "If the Taliban had controlled most of the district, we could not have prevented Al Qaeda from getting in there. While we could have nailed them occasionally with SOF, the spotter network would have largely allowed them to egress prior to us being able to maneuver on them if we had to fight our way everywhere we went. When the locals largely support the Afghan government because the insurgents have been cleared out and they have confidence in the security situation, they will not allow foreigners in to their areas, or tell us where they are so we can kill/capture them."

A rapid withdrawal of American forces from COIN operations would encourage terrorists in Pakistan to enter Afghanistan, where they would be free of the constraints that Pakistan imposes on the terrorist organizations that it tolerates. Earlier this year, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from COIN in several areas of eastern Afghanistan resulted in the migration of Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations from Pakistan to Afghanistan. A swift abandonment of COIN would also eliminate Pakistan's limited cooperation with the United States in CT matters, by demonstrating that the United States was no longer the biggest player in the region. How strong Al Qaeda will be following the death of Osama Bin Laden remains to be seen, but Pakistan is also home to other terrorist groups that enjoy the sympathy of Pashtun tribes straddling the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and pose a dire threat to the U.S. homeland, most

notably Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, which nearly detonated a massive bomb in Times Square last year.

Insecure districts that cannot be covered by coalition forces or Afghan national security forces in strength and cannot be included in community self-defense programs like ALP and ISCI should, at minimum, be evaluated regularly and, as necessary, be entered with force to disrupt enemy forces. The enemy should always fear that the counterinsurgents will show up at any moment. The closer the insurgents are to the high priority districts, the more they should be harassed, so that they must concern themselves with their next meal and next place of rest, instead of their next assassination or next IED emplacement. These enemy-centric operations will give the Afghan government space to strengthen its security forces and civil administrations.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai

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Across Afghanistan, the biggest challenge in executing counterinsurgency today and transition tomorrow is empowering Afghan leaders who can figure out what needs to be done, get subordinates and civilians to do it, and hold abuses of power to a minimum. Such leaders are required at

all levels, but especially at the local level where the conflict actually plays out. Thanks to years of work by the Coalition Security Transition Command-Afghanistan and NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, the Afghan National Army now has a good roster of company grade officers and is on the way to having capable field grade officers, although problems remain in terms of appointing the right officers to command slots. Leadership development in the Afghan National Police was sluggish until the shift of police development to the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan in late 2009, and programs to train and mentor governors continue to lag behind the army and police programs. Good police chiefs and governors are therefore considerably

smaller in number than good army commanders, and police chief and governor appointments are considerably more politicized than military appointments. As U.S. aid levels to Afghanistan decline, the cuts should hit the poorly managed and unproductive economic and social development programs, and steer clear of human capital development.⁸³ Convincing President Karzai to replace bad police chiefs and governors should be a matter of top national priority. The incoming team of Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General John R. Allen will need to muster all their personal skills and political assets to repair relations with Karzai, which have been badly damaged in recent years by the mistakes of some American officials, public disclosure of private American criticisms of Karzai, and Karzai's own foibles. However unfortunate it may be, America's fate depends heavily on its ability to influence the choices President Karzai makes in the next few years.

ENDNOTES

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- ³ Moyar, *A Question of Command*, 246-258.
- ⁴ See, for instance, the book reviews by David Ucko in *Journal of Military History*, vol. 74, no. 1 (January 2010), 320; and by Matthew Caris in *Small Wars Journal*, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/304-caris.pdf>.
- ⁵ Field Manual 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, 1-21, 1-29, 1-23, 5-12, A-8.
- ⁶ As shall be seen, 3/5 initially had slightly fewer troops than the British force it replaced. Several months into the tour, it began receiving reinforcements, and ultimately would have slightly more troops than the preceding force. The U.S. Marines had significant advantages over British forces in terms of resources, including more helicopters, better armored vehicles, better counter-IED equipment, and more ISR assets. But, as shall be demonstrated, these advantages did not give the Marines major advantages over the British in Sangin. The 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines conducted most operations on foot and found most IEDs by visual rather than technological means.
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- ⁸ Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, "'Tribes' and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan, 1980-2005," (London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2006), 9-17.
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- ¹³ Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand," 132-143.
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- ¹⁷ Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand," 137-138.
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