

# Multiplying by Zero

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I AM UNCERTAIN IF the war in Afghanistan is “winnable.” I do know this: U.S. success depends on the Afghans. For the U.S. forces to leave Afghanistan, we need them to “stand up, while we stand down.” For our efforts to have an impact, the Afghans have to function at a level where they can provide their own security, governance, and economic well-being, which arguably they were able to do in some shape or form before 1973. I am not sure we can get them up on their knees, let alone get them to stand up. Even if we get them up on their knees through unlimited funding and no time constraints, I am still not sure the U.S. would be able to leave. I did not arrive at this conclusion through a deep-seated analysis of the current strategy or some academic study of the region. I came to this idea as I watched three Afghan men trying to inflate a basketball, and I wondered if this were a metaphor for our efforts in Afghanistan.

## A Metaphor for the U.S. Effort in Afghanistan

I spent a summer as the physical education (PE) mentor to the National Military Academy of Afghanistan’s (NMAA) Physical Education department. My predecessor had recommended that I bring some equipment, so I brought along 30 basketballs, 12 volleyballs, and 12 soccer balls, as well as a few American footballs. Another previous U.S. mentor had provided the PE department with an electric air compressor, one that charges a car battery, has a floodlight, and probably retails for about \$50 at any auto store. I used this to pump air into a few balls when I first arrived. About a month later, I needed to fill up a few basketballs for some drills I planned to show the PE instructors. One of the Afghan PE instructors, a lieutenant colonel and the overseer of the air pump, grabbed the balls and began to fill one of them up.

I had been talking with my interpreter for a few minutes when I noticed the basketball was not getting any air. I pulled the pin out and found the clamp at the end of the fabric hose had come loose and some of the fabric had frayed. The pump was pushing air out but, because of the frayed fabric, air was not making it into the ball. The Afghan lieutenant colonel came over and told me it was not broken but that it would take time to fill up

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*PHOTO: An instructor explains basketball to his cadets, National Military Academy of Afghanistan, Kabul, 23 June 2009. (Photo courtesy of author)*

the basketball. I told him the pump was broken. He said no, it would take time. The equipment manager, a 47-year-old senior NCO who had been a colonel prior to Karzai's arrival, came over to see if he could fix the pump, as did the boxing instructor. For the next ten minutes, three men, all 40-odd years old, sat befuddled before this air compressor as if it were some sort of an oracle.

After turning the air pump on and off several times, turning it upside down, and shaking it, the Afghans' perplexity seemed to diminish when, through my translator, I said the fabric hose was frayed and was preventing a good seal. Ah, they could fix this problem. The boxing instructor knew what to do. He grabbed a roll of scotch tape, provided courtesy of the U.S. government, and wrapped the frayed end with scotch tape—not duct tape or maybe even masking tape. While those products may have had a chance at temporarily fixing the problem, such items were unavailable at NMAA, unless a U.S. mentor provided them. In the spirit of the often-cited Lawrence of Arabia—that better they do it tolerably rather than I do it perfectly—I kept my mouth shut, waited, and watched as these three men worked the problem.<sup>1</sup>

As I sat there, I noted that this air compressor was too complicated for them on a number of levels. Foremost, the technology was beyond anything they were accustomed to using, yet I knew every high school gym and garage in America had one. When I asked what they would do if the air pump was broken, the NCO showed me the backup air pump—a circa 1950s bicycle hand pump, which was also broken with a frayed hose and lacked an air valve to put a pin or stem into. More importantly I realized they had no easy way to replace this air pump. The Afghan military's supply system is certainly not mature enough to have electric air pumps available for requisition, and their local base supply system is not developed to the point where they would have an equipment center to borrow one. Nor could the PE department rely on the local Afghan economy. The price of an air pump was beyond their means, and even if they had the money, where would they buy one? The local bazaar does not stock electric air compressors. In the United States, an electric air pump is nice to have, not necessarily needed, but so cheap and available that it has become ubiquitous. But here in Afghanistan, the electric air pump is a

luxury, and without one, the PE department would struggle to provide inflated balls for their classes.

And now it was broken. After half an hour of air flowing into my basketball—the object of three sets of intent eyes and manipulating hands—they presented to me a semi-inflated sphere and definitive reassurance the air pump was not broken. My Afghan colleagues had no backup plan to fill up balls for their PE classes or intramural activities. When I pressed them for details, they said they did not know what they would do or how they would replace it. I told them they could ask the dean or the superintendent to get them one. “A very good suggestion and I support it,” said the head of the PE department, an Afghan colonel, but I knew that if I did not get them a replacement or personally ask the question to the dean or superintendent, nothing would happen.

As I watched the three well-intentioned men work through the difficulties of applying pieces of scotch tape to a frayed fabric hose, my heart began to feel heavy for them because they worked so diligently yet so ineffectively to fix a problem that was so easy to fix by our standards and resources. I had an affinity for my Afghan counterparts. They were tough, hospitable, endearing people. I also believed in the mission. By helping train the future Afghan officer corps, we were reinforcing legitimacy through a critical institution in Afghan society where shared values could be imparted and leveraged.

As in other Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, and Iraq, the military—for good and ill—served as the arbiter of societal control. Influencing the Afghan officer corps provided another pathway, arguably the most effective one, for U.S. influence. However, as I stared at the semi-inflated basketball in front of me, I wondered if this were a metaphor for our training mission in Afghanistan. The pump was able to get some air in the ball, but not enough to make it bounce. Were we sinking all this money and effort into the country only to bring it to a point where, like the basketball, it might be better than before but still ultimately and inherently ineffective?

I knew, before I handed them the basketball, that they would not be able to fill it up with air, and I realized that the “by, with, and through” mantra of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy—at least in my experience with the Afghan Military Academy's PE department—was inadequate. I hoped that

this was not the overall macro experience for the entire U.S. mentoring effort. I could not imagine how other mentors were faring, such as those who were teaching infantry tactics, aircraft maintenance, helicopter piloting, and supply system operations, but I sensed that if it were similar to my experience inflating this basketball, having their Afghani clients do it “tolerably” would be difficult.

We were partially to blame for this. No doubt, the Afghans struggled to adapt and to learn our methods, but we struggled to adapt our ways to them. Joint Publication 3-24 and Army Field Manual 3-24 stress the need for adaptability in order to learn how to adjust and meet the needs of the environment.<sup>2</sup> Yet, I did not get the sense we were adapting our methods to fit the Afghan way, or even that we could. The U.S. military way and Afghan societal ways are definitely different and have few common intersections. I know we want them to adapt to our way, but the American way may not be the best way for the Afghans. We lacked a healthy dose of skepticism when looking at our Afghan colleagues. Technological and cultural hurdles loomed large, but we had a mission to train the Afghans and, no matter the hurdle, we would train the Afghans. Because the American way was the only way we knew, that is what we were providing them. Dogmatism overrode pragmatism. Adaptability takes time, but after almost a decade in Afghanistan, what if the Afghans cannot or do not wish to take what we are trying to provide? This leads to the temptation to do it for them, but more important, what more can we do or should we do if the host country is not adapting?

## Absorption, Initiative, and Corruption

I saw three overwhelming issues with our “by, with, and through” approach: absorption, initiative, and corruption.

**Absorption.** A technology gap exists between the Afghans and us. The Afghans therefore have

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difficulty absorbing what we provide them. As was the case with the electric air compressor, our technology is too complicated for them, and we struggle to simplify it so they can understand it.

I asked one of the U.S. air advisory cadre why we were teaching them to fly Mi-17s rather than Blackhawks. He told me they were easier for them to fly. Compared to U.S. Blackhawks or CH-53s, the Mi-17 is primitive, and if America wanted to build an Afghan air force, it would have to equip it with aircraft that were not too technologically sophisticated. The Mi-17 was the solution. The problem is that we are reliant on a third country to equip the Afghans.

Relying on other countries for our mission has created odd surrogate relationships for the United States that are problematic because we can be cut out of the relationship. More importantly, *equipment builds relationships*. We have created a condition of dual reliance where we rely upon other nations to train us to be able to train the Afghans. In the case of the Mi-17, Americans are working with the Ukraine for training, technical support, and equipment. The equipment is tangential—symbolic in most cases—while the technical training, the follow-on maintenance, and the upgrades cement the relationship. If we cannot provide the Afghans with equipment that gives us the means to provide further support and the ability to nurture a relationship while building their capability, we are doing ourselves a disservice. For their part, the Afghans could cut the United States out of the picture and rely on Ukrainian or Russian support for their Mi-17 fleet support.

I saw this in the PE department. When I first arrived, I surveyed all the equipment. We had provided the Afghans with a fully stocked inventory of top-of-the-line PE equipment, yet most of it sat unused. We had built them a brand new gym that also sat unused for a variety of reasons. We had provided them with 23 brand new fitness machines, again unused until I had the head of the PE department encourage staff to use them. They were still only sparingly used and tightly controlled by PE instructors. I realized no one trusted anyone to care for the equipment, and theft was always a concern. The academy administration did not trust the PE instructors, and the PE instructors did not trust the cadets. This partially explained the



Photo courtesy of author.

The National Military Academy of Afghanistan (NMAA) PE trophy case. The wooden shelving and trophies were donated by the Turkish mentor mission at NMAA, Kabul, Afghanistan, 4 June 2009.

tight control of equipment and facilities, but there was something else. I asked them why they were not using what we provided them. The collective response from the instructors was that it was too nice for everyday use. They told me that if the equipment was damaged, it would not be replaced or repaired because they had no means to do either.

What I did notice was that many of the staff and cadets were wearing oddly branded athletic shoes and sweat suits. I asked them who provided this gear and they told me it was the Turks. The Turkish military also had a mentor mission at NMAA. I had noticed clocks, coffee mugs, and key chains stamped with the crossed flags of Turkey and Afghanistan throughout the PE department. I had also noticed the Turks had provided trophies with taped-on paper inscriptions as awards for the Afghan intramural championships. These trophies resided in a makeshift, crooked trophy case that greeted every visitor walking into the PE department.

I assumed cultural sensitivities were the reason I was not seeing U.S. flags everywhere. The U.S. team chief assured me that the Afghans knew we were the real source of equipment, and that all the

Afghans knew this. I did not get this impression. The sharp incongruence of what we provided and what they actually used gave me pause. We had built them the nicest gym facility in the entire country, we had provided them with Nike court shoes and \$55 Nike basketballs, and yet what everyone saw were these \$2 trinkets from the Turks and the Turkish-Afghan flags everywhere. The Turks were gaining influence with such little effort and cost, cultivating a relationship through cheap items, while we were getting little return on our investment. Their refusal to use what we provided created a paradoxical dependency effect. I wanted them to be self-sufficient, but I wanted them to use U.S.-provided equipment. Since the Afghans did not use what we provided, we had no need to provide them with more. They had plenty of U.S. equipment in storage. The Turks, on the other hand, were providing them with less-costly merchandise, and the Afghans were using it. Ultimately, they were more reliant on the Turks than on us, even though we were the ones stuck with the real cost of setting up a functioning PE department.

This problem illuminates the depth of our technological gap with the Afghans. Whether

weapon systems or air pumps, our technology confounds them. Unfortunately, we have not sufficiently adapted our technologies for the Afghans to understand and use them.

Our technologies, ostensibly efficient and cost effective, were actually neither in Afghanistan. This is what led to Mi-17 and Turkish PE equipment. An American Mi-17 trainer told me they finally had reached a breakthrough when the Afghans conducted a premission briefing using PowerPoint. In a country with a 90 percent illiteracy rate, computer literacy is an advanced skill, not an expected skill. PowerPoint is a starting point for us, but it is an advanced technology for the Afghans. Because we value technology and its implied progress, we easily forget that others do not or cannot wed themselves to technology.

We provided the PE department with 23 fitness machines, three of which had been broken for some time prior to my arrival. These machines perplexed the Afghans. One of the instructors asked me why anyone would need a machine to run when he could just run outside. I had often wondered that as well, but I remarked that if the weather were bad or too cold, you could use the treadmill to train. "Why not walk the stairs?" was the question I received from another PE instructor about the Stairmaster, and in

a country where I never saw an elevator, this also made sense. However, the fitness machines were another example of the tech gap. One of my first tasks was to find how the Afghans planned to fix the three broken machines. I was told they had one repairman in Kabul who could fix these machines. However, the machines sat unfixed throughout my entire time as a mentor. There simply was no one else who knew how to repair the equipment, and since three machines were already broken, the PE department head had limited the use of those that still functioned. Twenty still worked, so I convinced the PE department head to use them.

This small achievement soon led to another epiphany: technological troubleshooting may not be a universal cultural trait. Three faculty members were using the machines one day when one of the multiple and consistent daily power outages struck, knocking out power to all the machines. Rather than push buttons on the machines, cycle a breaker or turn the machine on and off again, the three faculty members began complaining to me that the machines did not work and needed fixing. After the power came back on, I simply reset the machines by turning them off and on again. I explained this procedure to them and showed them what to do if this happened again. What really astonished me, though, was



Photo courtesy of author.

Afghan faculty enjoy their lunchtime workout in the NMAA cardio room, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2 July 2009.

that after subsequent power failures the instructors unfailingly asked me to again perform that simple task for them.

As the weeks went by, I wondered if we were creating some sort of intractable dependency effect where the Afghans would be completely reliant on us. I now knew the answer—they just would not be dependent. As I surveyed the landscape of NMAA and the surrounding Kabul airport, littered with detritus from the Soviets, I sensed that either they would do without (as in the case of the gym equipment) or they would let things sit and rot when they broke down. I realized that our expectations for them to understand and use our technologies are simply set too high. We should be supplying them with chalkboards, yet we are trying to give them Internet solutions.

What we were providing could never be maintained without significant oversight. We overlooked this requirement. That said, we were not blind to the truth. All the mentors at NMAA had been told by the senior U.S. mentor to take an “appetite suppressant” in terms of Afghan capabilities and our preexisting expectations. This tech gap arguably could be overcome with enough time and education. In the case of the PE department, I had deliberately set low expectations and recommended lowering the standard of equipment we provided, but what really stood in my way of progress was what I considered significant cultural impediments. *The most glaring in my estimation was a limited sense of initiative.*

**Initiative.** Initiative, as a value, permeates American culture. In every aspect of U.S. society, someone thinks there is a better way; not so with the Afghans. I did not get any sense of a “can do” attitude from the PE department or from any other Afghan I encountered. They readily took what I provided—lesson plans, equipment, textbooks—but when I asked them how they planned on improving their lessons or expanding their curriculum or figuring out a supply system, they had no answers, no notion of how to improve, and no institutional mechanisms to foster improvement. The PE instructors told me I could provide them with improved lesson plans, but they would not do it themselves. I finally figured out that the level above them had to approve every change, which ultimately made the dean the one who determined what was best for the PE department, not the PE instructors themselves.

This strict hierarchy prevented any type of decentralization of authority or primary level decision making. It also quashed any initiative from bubbling up from the bottom. While hierarchy is not new to military organizations and is a fundamental trait throughout Afghan culture, it proved incapacitating when I was trying to make changes within the PE department. Instructors could not change their syllabi or their method of teaching without supervisor approval.

Like most of my U.S. mentor counterparts, I was mentoring a department head with the rank of colonel. I assumed, wrongly, that he had the authority to act on my suggestions. At the end of my tour, I provided him with a set of final recommendations. He told me all my recommendations were worthy and would be considered. I mentioned to him that I was reiterating some of the previous U.S. mentors’ recommendations. I asked why they had not been implemented. He told me that I did not understand. While all the recommendations they received were worthy, unless the dean told them to make changes, they would not make them.

I realized to have an impact, the other U.S. mentors and I probably should have been mentoring the dean. A key tenet to making recommendations is to get to the one who can make changes. I wondered if we were doing that. We had mentors at every level; however, it seemed that only one level, the top, really mattered. I mentioned to the PE head that I did not understand how the dean could know more about wrestling class than the wrestling coach, yet the PE head reassured me that he did. The possibility or even the thought of change emerging from the bottom—initiated by the instructors who knew the material and knew the students—seemed remote. Initiative has to emerge from those “in the know,” and the Afghans’ virtually absolute hierarchical allegiance squelched any enterprise among the PE instructors.

***This hierarchy allegiance prevented any type of decentralization of authority or primary level decision making.***

I wondered if other U.S. mentors had similar experiences. More pointedly, for me to have had an impact, I realized I should have been more familiar with the culture and language. I would have had a better understanding of why the Afghans seemed to be, at least to me, an authority culture and not a knowledge culture.

**Corruption, power, and perception.** Corruption as defined by the Afghans is often confused with inefficiency, Afghan power dynamics, and the nature of Afghan society. Every Afghan I spoke with cited corruption as the reason why the NMAA PE department could not get supplies from the Afghan National Army. I noticed the Afghans had the resources, but they had no concept of distributing resources on the basis of priority or need. Resources seemed to accumulate at certain points and then not be distributed effectively, or at all. Afghan notions of power and trust superseded effective distribution.

The PE department head held the keys to the gym facilities. I asked him why he did not leave the doors unlocked so other faculty members and cadets could come and go as they pleased to use the facilities. He told me that he could not trust others to take care of what was his, and that I was naïve as an American because in America I can trust my cadets and officers to take care of PE equipment. Offhandedly, he mentioned that other instructors had to come through him to use the gym. This, I came to find out, gave him leverage over the faculty, a form of power. The material value of the equipment or its actual relevance did not matter. This explained why completely unusable equipment—broken field hockey sticks, punctured basketballs—remained on equipment rosters. As long as the PE department head had it, he could control it, and he wanted to control it because it gave him power in the eyes of others. This may also have explained why so many cadets wanted to be supply officers rather than infantry, aviation, or artillery officers. Many of the cadets told me that being a supply officer was a good job because that individual was in charge of resources. I interpreted this as a sense of leverage over their peers. This troubled me because the officer corps we were training would be perpetuating this problem. I did not know how we would do it, but we needed to inculcate the concept that keys to supply accounts served purposes that transcended personal aggrandizement. We also had to overcome a pervasive lack of trust.

Afghanistan is a patriarchal society. Trust is implicit among family members, which explains why Afghans prefer jobs in which they can use their position to take care of family members. This also explains the lack of trust I witnessed. At NMAA, we were trying to build a military academy that rewards merit. This is a foreign concept in a country whose social fabric is familial. Trust is not given outside of familial or tribal lines. This led to the PE department locking up everything. More important, it left a lot of competent Afghans sitting on the outside with feelings of discontent and powerlessness. If they did not have family connections, they could not get a job or have any chance to get ahead.

A particularly well-educated Afghan once approached me about working for the U.S. military. I wondered why he was working as the assistant to the NCO equipment manager. He had recently graduated from Kabul University with a degree in journalism, and he had decent English skills. He told me this was the only job he could get because he did not have the family connections required for securing a job as a journalist. He lamented that merit did not matter; only connections counted, and he did not have any. He said the U.S. military was his only hope because it hired on merit.

This widespread lack of trust and desire to aggregate resources led to a supply system so byzantine that when I asked for an equipment requirements list, they produced two—premised on hope, not on priority. One list had been created in response to a possible windfall of \$1,500 the senior U.S. mentor had tried to obtain for each department at NMAA. The second list contained standing requirements as identified by the Afghans. Neither included a scale that they actually needed, but the second list included a swimming pool, which in a landlocked country with no navy could probably wait. It also included soccer balls. A few months earlier, the PE department had received 200 soccer balls from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) donated by Europeans after a written plea from the dean. In short, the Afghans did not need the soccer balls. They had no mechanisms as we do to prioritize, request, and pay for supplies. Everything is ad hoc.

Someone needs to take an ice pick and break apart the aforementioned aggregation points to get the

supply system flowing. More important, the Afghans need the mind-set to trust others to use resources correctly and to distribute items based on priority and need, not on patronage.

This separation and facilitation is not likely to happen because mind-sets are the most difficult things to change. Cultural tendencies and beliefs persist tenaciously. We can give the Afghans everything they need in terms of equipment and training, but if we cannot change their mind-set, this assistance is all for naught. Their lack of initiative, coupled with their seemingly insuperable inefficiencies, lead to a sense of malaise when addressing their problems. In my experience with the PE department, they took no ownership for their problems, and I did not get the sense they had any proclivity to do so.

My initial feelings of sympathy for the Afghans waned as I realized that they did not take responsibility for any of their problems. They always had an excuse—corruption, poor government—or blamed someone else—the Soviets, the Americans, ISAF, Pakistan—for their problems. Discussions with Afghans often reminded me of Tom Friedman’s point about Lebanese politicians in his book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*:

Like so many politicians born and raised in countries that had not managed their own affairs for years, even centuries, Salam (Saeb Salam, former Lebanon’s PM [prime minister]), was convinced that there was always somebody else in the world, some distant power, which had the ultimate word and the military might to impose it.<sup>3</sup>

The Afghans felt the same way. Someone else was in control. It was never their fault. Any situation could be explained away by something they seemingly had no control over, like the government or God. The *inshallah* mind-set, while noble and pious, is incapacitating. The mind-set is the default position for everything that they cannot explain, and it enables them to find fault with U.S. efforts.

## The Imperiled Math of “By, With, and Through”

When I first arrived at NMAA, my interpreter complained to me about U.S. corruption. I asked him how the U.S. was corrupt. He told me that while \$600 billion had been invested in Afghanistan, only \$6 billion had gone to the Afghans (his numbers).

He complained that the money went from the U.S. government to U.S. contractors. His math was wrong, but he was right about the flow of U.S. money. I was puzzled that he labeled this corruption. I asked him what U.S. forces needed. I then pointed to the rental cars in the parking area in front of me that we were contracting from Kellogg, Brown, and Root (now known as KBR, Inc.); the bottled water in my hand from a United Arab Emirates distributor; and to my computer, which relied on Pakistani Internet service support. I asked him if anyone in Afghanistan could supply these items to U.S. forces. He told me he didn’t think so. I realized at that point that our “by, with, and through” approach might be doomed.

Afghanistan and the Afghans provide such a limited foundation to build from that “by, with, and through” simply may not be feasible. In many ways, *we are multiplying by zero*. The Afghans have limited infrastructure; limited agricultural capability; limited to no indigenous industrial capacity; an immature consumer economy; an impotent and incoherent security apparatus; and a fledgling Western-style government overseeing a decentralized, tribally based population. No foundation exists to build on. The lack of an existing infrastructure prevents the creation of second- and third-order economic effects, construction of a security force, and the development of functioning public transportation and communication services. The United States is investing in a country in which there is literally nothing to invest. Virtually everything the U.S. uses has to be imported because Afghanistan is fundamentally underdeveloped.

What I witnessed in Afghanistan is best summed up in Robert Kaplan’s *The Ends of the Earth*. Kaplan notes that when the United States began the Peace Corps in the 1960s, both Sierra Leone and India required basic agricultural know-how. Thirty years later, India had become a net food exporter and a producer of high technology with no further need of farm assistance. Sierra Leone, on the other hand, remained exactly where it was in the 1960s when the Peace Corps first arrived.

The message of Sierra Leone was brutal: The end was nigh in the failed battle, fought valiantly by the liberal West, to equalize cultures around the world. The differences between some cultures and



Photo courtesy of author.

**U.S.-provided Dell computers for the female cadets to use are being unloaded from a U.S.-provided Ford Ranger truck in front of the main NMAA Administration Building, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2 July 2009. The nine female cadets were expected to attend medical school in India. A key concern is that their families would not allow the women to use these computers or the computers would end up on the black market.**

others (regarding the ability to produce exportable material wealth) appeared to be growing rather than diminishing.<sup>4</sup>

I could substitute Afghanistan for Sierra Leone. It was difficult to make my interpreter understand this, but he knew it when I asked where the ISAF would get its water, its rental cars, and its Internet service. He knew that whatever we needed would come from somewhere other than Afghanistan.

We are in so many ways the polar opposite of Afghanistan. Survey any index that compares countries. The United States and Afghanistan are at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of government transparency, corruption, and freedom.<sup>5</sup> The chasms I witnessed between us and them at my level were vast and may not be possible to overcome. If I were to extrapolate my experience in the PE department to the overall U.S. effort, I would guess that the manpower, the resources, and the money to build a somewhat secure state with a quasi-modern functioning infrastructure in Afghanistan would be astronomical; and even if America took it on as a

national endeavor, chances of success would be slim. However, we are part-timers and will eventually leave.

My anecdotal experience reinforced the conundrum that we cannot want Afghanistan to succeed more than the Afghans do, but that seems to be the case. I wanted them to be able to blow up that basketball, but they could not. We want them to have a secure, quasi-modern country, but how will we get them there any other way except by doing what we know? We seem unaware that our resource-intensive efforts may not work and Afghanistan might not make strategic sense in the end.

Our inability to empower the Afghans to our standards of effectiveness is by no means entirely the fault of the Afghans. A lot of the blame rests with us. We are trying to raise them to a standard they cannot reach, and we are fully aware that they will not get there. I knew they would not be able to fill up the basketball with a broken air compressor, but I still let them try. It is our standard and not theirs we are measuring them by, but what other standard

should we use? This is the challenge of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. We need to adapt our methods and ways to best suit the Afghans, but how will we know we are doing that? We were still pouring money and resources into Afghanistan after eight years of largely fruitless efforts, so I continued to provide the PE department with equipment and assistance to train cadets.

I was repeatedly reminded that our mission was to train the Afghans and that we would continue to train the Afghans, regardless of circumstances. However, the circumstances I encountered have to be reconciled with reality—cultural impediments, the lack of initiative and ownership, and technical illiteracy.

Our efforts demonstrated the classic adage, “When you don’t know what to do, you do what you know.” We know the American way of warfare predicated on technology, a fat tooth-to-tail ratio, and an educated, professional fighting force. I know what a U.S. military academy PE department looks like. This is what we are trying to give the Afghans, and they are not getting it or don’t want to get it. We are pushing American solutions on them with little or no success. After eight years, even “tolerably” was still a future goal. They had put in some air but the basketball didn’t bounce. Much like our overall endeavor in Afghanistan, I wonder if the effort to inflate the ball is worth it. **MR**

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#### NOTES

1. T.E. Lawrence, “Twenty-Seven Articles,” *The Arab Bulletin*, 20 August 1917, Article 15.
2. U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24 and Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 15 December 2006), sec. 7-46 and 7-47; Joint Publication 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, 5 October 2009: X-17.
3. Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York, Anchor Books

Doubleday, 1989), 207.

4. Robert Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 54.

5. Random survey of rankings via the Internet: <[http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/gov\\_cor-government-corruption](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/gov_cor-government-corruption)>, <<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781359.html>>, <<http://www.heritage.org/Index/Ranking.aspx>>.