

Identifying the Center of Gravity of Afghan Mentoring

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Innocenti, USA, Retired, *Kabul, Afghanistan*—Major David H. Park’s article “Identifying the Center of Gravity of Afghan Mentoring” (November-December 2010, *Military Review*) misses the mark not only in understanding the lessons of Lawrence of Arabia, but also about what should be the focus of the tactical Afghan National Army (ANA) mentoring effort. He correctly assesses that the ANA’s center of gravity is the commanders, but I strongly disagree with his view that the decisive point is the successful teaching of the almighty Military Decision Making Process (MDMP). The focus of our mentoring efforts should be leadership 101 at all levels within the ANA.

Major Park starts his article by making a good point. The task of building an insurgent force is definitely easier than building a regular Army. However, he misses the key point, which makes Lawrence’s story applicable even today. Lawrence’s statement, “It is better to let them do it with their own hands than we do it” means “do not to let one’s cultural arrogance as a mentor override the ability of the mentee to accomplish the task within his culture limitations, even if the end state is not up to one’s standards.” It is more important that they can *do* the task than *how* they do it. In Lawrence’s book *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, where he is contemplating how to develop his campaign against the Turks, he realizes that it is impossible to expect the Arabs to operate as a regular army. He realizes that the best way to fight the campaign is to capitalize on using the Arab strength and cultural familiarity of the “raid” as the basis for his campaign. The lesson of understanding the culture

and working from within it to achieve one’s aims, as opposed to imposing a foreign concept that goes against the culture, is important. Unfortunately, this is a lesson that we disregard in our mentoring effort in Afghanistan, almost daily.

Major Park is correct in that, like it or not, ANA doctrine is a carbon copy of U.S. doctrine, and that is a strategic mistake. Instead of determining what procedures or doctrine will work best within the confines of Afghan culture, we have imposed foreign concepts on them that go against their history. The American Army has done a good job of developing an effective fighting force based on exploiting the strengths of our society, but to think that our model is the best model for all others to emulate smacks of Western arrogance. It repeats the errors of Britain in the 19th century and the Soviet Union prior to its collapse. The ANA will never be a mirror of the U.S. Army, yet we are desperately trying to make it one.

Major Park’s description of Afghan decision making at the tactical level is accurate. As one of the primary mentors to the gentlemen in the article’s photos of the 1st Brigade/207th Corps starting in September 2009, I personally witnessed those same situations. His description of the Afghan culture as centralized, top-down driven, and deriving its strength from its commanders is also accurate. But to make the leap that from a highly centralized culture we should focus on a staff-centric decision making process as our primary focus for mentoring at the tactical level is just plain wrong. If we want to focus on a tactical-level decision making process, then Afghan cultural aspects would tell us to focus on a commander-centric process. Many successful armies, such as the Russian, German, and British, have had tactical decision making processes that are commander-centric

and still take advantages of the staff. The fact that many of the Afghans have had formal Russian military education might lead us to look at their methods as a basis for such a process. An army that struggles with low literacy, very high AWOL rates, and comes from a society that has been devastated by war for almost 30 years is not ready for the American version of “Auftragstaktiks.” In my 30 rotations at the NTC as a senior observer controller, I did not see many U.S. brigades and battalions that could effectively conduct MDMP, so it is hard for me to imagine that we should build our entire tactical ANA mentoring effort at the corps and brigade level in Afghanistan around it.

Our focus for the ANA mentoring effort should be simple—leadership 101. More battles are won by effective leadership than by mastering any staff decision making process. We would do much better in acknowledging the centralized nature of the Afghan military culture and working to improve their leadership than to try to impose a Western concept of decision making on them. When I hear a senior Afghan colonel responding to an issue about providing water to his new soldiers by saying “Why should I get them water when I never had water when I was training,” my number one concern is lack of leadership. Anyone who has spent any time training the ANA will tell you that the number one problem facing ANA development at all levels is lack of effective leadership. In my opinion, without effective leadership at all levels from the Ministry of Defense level to the squad, the ANA will never be able to stand on its own no matter how much money we throw at the problem.

“Soldier from the Wars Returning”

A. E. Housman, *Last Poems*, 1922

Soldier from the wars returning,
 Spoiler of the taken town,
Here is ease that asks not earning;
 Turn you in and sit you down.

Peace is come and wars are over,
 Welcome you and welcome all,
While the charger crops the clover
 And his bridle hangs in stall.

Now no more of winters biting,
 Filth in trench from fall to spring,
Summers full of sweat and fighting
 For the Kesar or the King.

Rest you, charger, rust you, bridle;
 Kings and kesars, keep your pay;
Soldier, sit you down and idle
 At the inn of night for aye.



U.S. Army soldiers debark from a U.S. Air Force Douglas C-124A-DL Globemaster II, Korea, 1 November 1952. (U.S. Air Force)