



The Next Time We Reinvent Someone Else's Country ...

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THE PAIN OF our recent experiences in nation building will eventually wear off, and we probably will again plunge or mission-creep into reinventing someone else's country to suit ourselves. After all, the political and economic stresses in Southwest Asia remain unchanged.

We should try a new approach: to learn from our past unhappy experiences. Historically, anything that has happened before could happen again, but anything that has never happened before is highly unlikely in the future. Very rarely, if ever, has one country successfully reinvented another country's government without resorting to total war; so, a successful American makeover project will defeat long odds.

In order to improve our prospects, we should review some realities about Afghanistan that illustrate what we must do and understand, and ask questions that would help to either turn our assumptions into facts or dismiss them. If we start with the wrong operating model or campaign plan, nature will teach us very expensive lessons.

What Are We Getting Into?

We must analyze the conditions of the campaign before defining its objectives because the combat phase will change conditions. We must identify which conditions we want to change and forecast how change will affect the outcome. Good strategy is often indirect and drives change instead of merely reacting to conditions. Accurate assessment requires insight, not self-delusion, particularly the naive notion that the American way can or should be applied everywhere.

When we failed in our specified mission to capture Osama bin-Laden, we denied all historical precedent and concentrated on transforming Afghanistan. We had a strategy of indirect approach to render Al-Qaeda harmless by starving it; that is, we deprived the Taliban of their ability to disburse Afghan national assets to Al-Qaeda. By thus inserting ourselves into the conditions of Afghanistan, we promoted the Taliban from a tribal pro-Pashtun gang

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PHOTO: U.S. Army SGT Anthony Stewart, left, and SPC Jared Sweet, both with 3rd Battalion, 19th Indiana National Guard Agribusiness Development Team, pull security at the Directorate of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Land services, Khowst Province, Afghanistan, 5 May 2011. (U.S. Army, PFC Donald Watkins)

to an anti-crusader and anti-American movement with international backers with religious or political interests.

Did we correctly identify the source and dimensions of political strife in Afghanistan? What other contingent or complementary conflicts influence the one that affects the United States, ones we might quickly resolve or mitigate? We must be prepared to take sides in an internal conflict, or else be the target for all sides' enmity.

Who are the popular and effective local leaders? We should not expect a local candidate who promises to deliver our version of good governance to be automatically popular in this Third World country.

The sources of social and political hostility may be too diverse, and the rebels fighting the government too incoherent to permit practical diplomatic dialog. In addition, the ranks of the insurgents often include criminals and those who aid and abet them. We must distinguish between police targets and military ones.

How much infrastructure, facilities, and forces can the local economy and demographics sustain? High volume coalition aid is not necessarily better help, and too much structure will collapse without perpetual subsidy or become a Potemkin village for show, becoming, finally, a bonanza for looters.

The economy of Afghanistan traditionally survived on extortion from caravans passing through, on foreign assistance funds, and on patronage. Who will pay for Afghanistan's political stability after we leave? The Chinese, who do not have a military role in Afghanistan and are not angering Afghans with collateral damage, are building mines and industrial enterprises for Afghanistan's post-NATO future. Still, Afghanistan's tax base will remain weak.

How do the people and their leaders exercise political power in Afghanistan? Who levies taxes and allocates resources? Is there a functioning national government? *Warlordism* is the current Afghan party politics. The tribe is the fundamental political bloc, and the warlord leads a tribe or region. In

the absence of an effective central government, the Afghans submit to those leaders who have enough brute power to impose order. Even in America, desperate and harried people find refuge in gangs. The dynamic is universal.

Without a functioning judicial system to ensure accountability, a government army is just a pirate band held together by their boss's largesse. Why should the people support a regime that is just another tax collector and does nothing to provide security or prosperity?

Why would a government official be more loyal to a gang leader than to national institutions, aside from simple greed? Without a viable pension system, government employees have little confidence they will have a financially secure retirement at the end of public service. An uncertain future compels people to make the most of the present. When there are no enablers of selfless public service, officials will inevitably resort to monetizing their power.

We expect the U.S. military to defeat any tactical or operational opponent, but we need powerful national logistics to make distant strategic engagements successful. Where are our lines of logistical communication? Will dodgy logistics force us to pay tribute to certain counterproductive neighbors? In this part of the world, the U.S. Navy owns the ocean—except for the pirates—and the U.S. Air Force owns the skies—except for the airspace, and neither owns the foreign bases. Thus, American freedom to maneuver is limited. When we abandon the moral high ground for pragmatic reasons, we are copying our enemies' behavior and allowing them to own the strategic initiative and push us into a quagmire.

What Do We Want?

If we have no clearly announced attainable objective, how do we know if we are winning or losing the fight? If we do not know that we are winning,

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then we probably are not. Are the odds of success favorable, or should we cut our losses and bail out? We may think we are heroes resolved on victory when our allies think we are foolishly bullheaded.

What reason do we give for our actions? Will this reason win Afghan hearts and minds? Informed Afghans understood our desire to catch Bin-Laden and the Northern Alliance welcomed American help, but after we failed to catch him, we stayed to transform Afghanistan, which the Afghans suspect is an excuse to destroy their society. We are not the first Westerners who came to “help” them.

History shows that alien armies eventually leave Afghanistan—and the faster the better, for everyone concerned. However, our declaring an exit date does not change the enemy’s strategy because he already knows that we will leave his home one day. Moreover, we want the temporary condition of our presence to have a lasting effect.

Overall, our sustained counterinsurgency (COIN) tenacity costs us much more than it costs the enemy. Cost avoidance will eventually pull the plug on COIN. It is too costly to maintain the new government at a time when we cannot fund our own government and social requirements at home.

If we do not acknowledge that we will leave, we imply that we may stay forever, which is not possible. If we struggle to remain indefinitely, our resilient enemy will see us leave in the end, and our good deeds will disappear.

Speed is imperative. The longer we stay, the more the natives resent us. Each tragic error in combat wipes out many, many of our good works and much of our progress, and time presents evermore opportunities for such tragic incidents.

The United States invaded Afghanistan during a time when Americans were in a state of irrational exuberance over the imaginary value of their real estate and other financial assets. Now, the global economy has collapsed, and we feel we can no longer afford as much military power. We fully funded the campaign in Afghanistan with budget supplements, but now have to change our national military strategy to fit our straitened circumstances. Our coalition allies, too, have higher priorities for their discretionary spending than paying for military expeditions. The war in Afghanistan is not even protecting coalition trade. As for the Chinese, they have found ways to monetize the military investment made by the United States. They sleep comfortably in their



U.S. Air Force, CPT Peter Shinn

U.S. Army 1LT Scott Shirk hands out training materials to high school students from the Shegal District as their orchard training begins at the Bar Chage Demonstration Farm north of Asadabad, Afghanistan, 23 April 2011.

beds because we rough Americans are willing to do violence on their behalf.

What Do The Natives Want?

The coalition and the Afghan government are fighting two different wars. We are fighting against international terrorism, but the Afghan government is fighting an invasion from Pakistan. We may offer the natives what they need, but they have emotionally invested themselves in what they want. What are their aspirations and what do they fear?

What is the economic and political landscape? Undereducated people living in desolation feel insecure for good reason, and they cannot sustain or be enthusiastic about democratic government. Economics drives politics, and the politics that promotes prosperity is the most popular. Prosperity produces the security and stability to grow altruism and a vision for the future. The 2011 UN Report of Human Development Indices ranks Afghanistan as the 172nd worst country out of 187. People who receive no benefit from the central government have no stake in its survival. People who are desperate for safety and food are not always idealists or loyal citizens. Afghans have their own vision of what must change, if anything.

Culture is a huge part of Afghan politics. Indeed, Afghanistan calls itself the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. People defend their culture more fervently than their government and are suspicious of aliens. Islam does not encourage compromise. Afghans may see our effort to promote republicanism as the nose of the Christian camel entering the tent. We should be able to understand this fear of outside invasion to a certain extent. After all, even in secular, democratic America, the issue of illegal immigration is not strictly an economic one.

Why do the Afghan people or any people submit to warlords? Is there a Stockholm syndrome at work in which the people accept their lot? If they feel secure and understand their place in the social order, can they live with it even if they are debased? When only a few serfs rebel, should we then dismiss the remainder as hopelessly submissive?

Most Afghans who live in the provinces where the heaviest fighting has taken place have never heard of the 9/11 attacks, and they have absolutely no idea why NATO forces are in their country. In November 2010, Reuters reported that a poll of residents of Hel-



U.S. Army LTC James Geracci, left, Combined Joint Task Force-1, talks with Afghan Border Police (ABP) COL Niamat, right, the ABP Zone 1 surgeon, through an interpreter, center, about the contents of a medical items box that was delivered to the area's ABP headquarters in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, 4 June 2011. (U.S. Army, SGT Kim Browne)

mand and Kandahar Provinces found that 92 percent of the 1,000 men sampled did not know about the Al-Qaeda hijackings. The think tank that commissioned the poll concluded: "The lack of awareness of why we are there contributes to the high levels of negativity toward the NATO military operations and made the job of the Taliban easier. We need to explain to the Afghan people why we are here." We could hardly be more alien to the Afghans, and our operations are inflicting a lot of collateral damage in the name of their self-interest. In H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, what would be the Martians' "winning hearts and minds" strategic communication message to Earthlings? Are we asking the natives to suspend disbelief?

Afghan officials have an Afghan vision of government institutions that amounts to government by the elite, for the elite. The Afghan official feels he must display status symbols for people to take him seriously, and he wants to be near the flagpole where the power is distributed, instead of in the foxhole and marginalized.

Our democratization of Afghanistan produced the unpopular Karzai regime. As long as the

United States will not replace Karzai with someone respected by the Afghans, we will not have friends in Afghanistan, just accomplices. Lately, the U.S. government has made moves to negotiate directly with the Taliban, bypassing the elected Afghan government. We are discrediting Afghan sovereignty and independence by doing so, and this was the cause of the Third Anglo-Afghan War.

Gratitude is not a bankable, long-term asset. We have exhibited more than a little hubris in working with the Afghans. The natives will remain long after we depart. Any Afghan memorials to heroes will be to the local boys who fought the foreigners. After all, how many statues are there in America to the valiant redcoats who gave their lives for King and Country?

Who Are the Stakeholders?

Who has an economic or political interest in ending this war? Who would benefit from stability and stopping the cash flow?

The cash flow touches the coalition military and contractors in the U.S. military-industrial-academic complex. (National defense is a lucrative market for deep thinking.) The short-term cash flow is high, but the military establishment must eventually pay the peace dividend Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has announced. However, this time we declared the peace dividend before victory was at hand. Clearly, if the enemy's strategy was to draw us into squandering our power and regional relevance, he can argue that he is winning.

The Afghan elite directly and indirectly benefit from bundles of coalition cash. There is even a growing but precarious Afghan middle-class of security guards and salaried soldiers.

The Taliban commit violence against individuals, and the coalition drops bombs. Not only do Afghans naturally object to American bombs killing their people, they prefer that *kafirs* (infidels) from outside the tribe die instead of Muslims. They would rather let the Muslim Taliban escape than that the *kafirs* bomb the village. The village is worth all the *kafirs* in the world. In evidence of how alien we are to Afghanistan, even President Karzai admitted that in a Pakistan versus NATO conflict, he would have to support his neighbor.

What other regional powers or neighbors have a dog in the fight? Do the neighboring "-Stans" share our political priorities?

What do our allies expect to gain and how committed are they? In today's global economy, our allies have many alternate investments to a faraway war, such as supporting a growing population of people too old to work, and promoting the creation of true economic value through mining or agriculture or local manufacturing. Instead of bearing the crushing expense of a security system against a stateless terrorist operating from a distant mud hut, many of our allies are willing to accept a prudent risk of casualties to protect their true national strength, which is their civilian economy. Does the U.S. taxpayer feel that his enormously expensive travel security follows common sense, or feel more confident since the public buildings of the "Home of the Brave" became concrete bunkers?

I see disturbing parallels to the ancient Delian League in which Athens used its allies' cash for self-serving strategic moonshine like Sicily. Today's strategic American "expeditionary capability" looks like adventurism to many NATO bill-payers. We would do well to remember that the misjudgments of the Athenian leaders of the League sucked the credibility out of the alliance and in the end, their allies turned against them.

How Do the Natives Do Things?

We should let them do things their way, because it is faster, cheaper, and more effective than converting them to our way. Afghans know what right looks like, and know that they did it themselves. Afghanistan had its most prosperous and stable period in its modern history under Zahir Shah, when Afghans were independent and hired any necessary foreign technical expertise.

Compared to us, the Afghans have a fundamentally different view of authority and a very different military tradition, so they approach organizational decision making in a much different way. The Afghan social structure and Army has always been leader-centric without the delegation of authority that is essential to our management principles. Afghan organizations are flat with only one decision maker. We advise them to build a noncommissioned officer corps, but they point out that they defeated the Soviets without sergeants or other subordinate leaders.

In a Western management hierarchy, each ascending rank or authority requires additional



(U.S. Army, SGT Breanne Pye)

U.S. Army CPT Chris Strelluf, right, assigned to 1st Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Raider, interacts with a local soccer player during a ribbon cutting ceremony signifying the official opening of a new soccer field in Subdistrict One of Kandahar City in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 8 June 2011.

individual qualifications. Afghanistan does not have enough educated and experienced people to lead or staff an army as large as we are imposing on them. In their flat organizations, rank means only a larger paycheck.

The Afghan foxhole exists to serve the Kabul flagpole. In the traditional Afghan way of war, the government in Kabul gives arms to a growing mass of tribesmen that marches toward the enemy. Their command structure is tribal. There is not much difference between the historic Afghan operational field force and an angry mob. After combat, the surviving tribesmen keep the equipment and the government keeps its power. The rulers conduct war as a one-way trip for the disposable common soldier. They see no need for an enduring, expensive military institution bigger than a palace guard and central arsenal.

The Afghans also know that their own method of warfare defeated many enemies, including the British and the Soviets, and that the barely literate Taliban use that same method to keep coalition

forces huddled in Hesco castles and mine-resistant, ambush-protected military vehicles (except for nighttime snatch-and-flee raids). To Afghans, the Western way of war replaces emotional commitment, audacity, and charismatic leadership with inhuman machines, dilatory overstudy, and an intricate organization that obscures individual valor and glory. The contrast in styles recalls the legendary meeting of King Richard I and Saladin in which the European broad sword chops the chain, but not the silk kerchief that the *shamshir* slices elegantly in mid-air. Worth pointing out is, at that time, castles were offensive weapons that projected power into hostile territory, and our huge, castle-like embassies and bases present this same image of aggressive foreign intrusion.

Political power is exercised through the allocation of resources, and to control resources is to control government. The central government of Afghanistan can control its outlying commanders by prioritizing and metering resources distributed through its logistics system. The absence of

delegated authority seriously hinders converting Afghan logistics to a NATO-style “pull” system. No Afghan materiel manager will issue from his intermediate stock if he can pass the requirement up the supply chain. Afghans have a much different concept of accountability for government property and stewardship. Accountability is not delegated. No intermediate Afghan official will even take the responsibility to dispose of unneeded property. In Afghanistan, possession means ownership, so the soldier considers his issued equipment to be his personal property, which he can keep or trade up.

What really matters to us should be how he uses it. In combat, the coalition hands out equipment needed to win. Later, because of the importance of oversight to Western-style stewardship, our resource managers arrive and try to establish property accountability. Some issued weapons may later be sold in the local bazaar, but the vast majority of them are properly used for the intended purpose of fighting the enemy.

The total compensation of an Afghan official traditionally includes the power to dispense patronage, so a high official has many clients on his personal staff and receives petitioning tribal members as part of his normal working day. To us, patronage is corruption, but it is essential to personal authority in Afghan society. Kinship is as valid a quality for membership and leadership in an Afghan institution as education or any other measure of merit.

Without a functioning judicial system, there can be no rule of law backed up by due process to penalty. Westerners who train Afghans to our familiar sophisticated system of transparent regulation will always be frustrated when they do not take it seriously. Lack of enforced oversight is probably the biggest obstacle to transforming the Afghan government and building its army.

In the face of these conditions, we are trying to create a NATO-compliant Afghan government and army. We seem to have forgotten our experience in Vietnam. Building a national army is as much political science and social science as military science. American advisors and trainers of the Afghan soldiers, bureaucrats, and leaders very often do much good. Many people with outstanding academic credentials visit Afghanistan to assess and advise, but some of their recommendations are afflicted with rigorous scholarship. Too much deep thought can

lead to overengineering. Academics are primarily analysts who are not audacious executors of policy. Visiting academics are usually mission-complete when they have written, graphed, and briefed. The operators, of course, are free to exercise judgment and ignore that advice if it is not already overcome by events (especially if it is in a thick and arcane book). Many recommendations work on paper, but crash against the foibles, biases, and vanities of people with power.

Intricate process is a hallmark of the American style of defense management and rarely takes a speedy route to the objective. Increasingly complex processes force growth in headquarters staffs and information management hardware. The Afghans do not have the assets to support that style of management and do not value it. The Afghans observe that their enemy seems to be doing quite well without policy wonks or much professional education of any sort.

The Afghans are very smart and wonder why we give them so much political science when they need military science to survive. We are teaching them a complex five-year strategic and programming process while the Taliban is rocketing the Ministry of Defense compound. Furthermore, they know that the U.S. government does not faithfully implement the policies it teaches. American officials often ignore mandated processes and schedules, treating them merely as unenforceable confections.

Our own military culture has a built-in hesitation to act. Commanders are so intent on situation analysis and weighing courses of action to avoid error that they often delay decisive action until their impatient political masters demand it. The civilian force and resource provider eventually has to light a fire under the commander to get him to accomplish what he said was undoable. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s comment about having “to fight with the army you have” meant

American officials often ignore mandated processes and schedules, treating them merely as unenforceable confections.

that preparation cannot go on indefinitely. Combat power is relative, and an important evaluation of readiness for combat is to ask, “Would I trade my capabilities and position for those of the enemy?” On the strategic level, we do not have the national military strategy that we need; we have the strategy that we are willing to pay for.

America is currently trading expensive mass for cheaper hardware with the hope that distance weapons and special operators can force the desired political outcomes. We may be trading the strategy of friendly nation building for indecisive gunboat diplomacy applied from the operational periphery. Without the military stamina for a long war, we will have fewer operational and strategic options, and without decisive action, the conflict will extend and exacerbate our vulnerability. America can make the biggest bang in a brief battle, but the world knows that we can lose the little long wars. Does our national military strategy improve conditions, or is it only a spending plan pared in reaction to a fiscal deficit?

We mentors and our Afghan students have different mentalities. The Afghans understand Soviet-style logistics management, and our increasingly frequent resort to that simpler style shows that we probably are learning more from them than they from us.

Afghanistan is a culture of dialogue versus Power Point. They communicate with words instead of graphics. They even resist including diagrams in their technical documents. Dedicated and progressive Afghan public servants struggle to change their management culture while handicapped by the lack of educated staff personnel, automation tools required for modern management processes, and the lack of delegated authority to act.

The international coalition does not hand the Afghans much money about which to make decisions, anyway. We find it easier to bypass the Ministry of Defense and the strategic policy process that we

taught them and work problems directly with the Afghan General Staff. We thereby discredit the official civilian-led decision-making process about which we preach.

When the Afghan logistic bureaucracy seems stuck, the anxious American advisor instead often intervenes to buy the essential items with coalition funds. The Afghans quickly learned that Americans reward Afghan slowness with free stuff. Afghans value and admire hoarding (even junked government vehicles and dangerous obsolete ammunition are considered national treasures), and they try to keep their warehouses filled by ignoring requisitions. They are new to life-cycle management.

How Will We Know When We Are Finished?

Some of the points discussed above were foreseeable and some are probably visible only in hindsight after a lot of “scar-tissue learning.” Either way, we should remember them in order to cope with the future. It is too late to make a U-turn in our Afghanistan strategy. Maybe reduced resourcing will allow nature to take its course and let the Afghans conduct their own war.

Maybe we will recognize mission accomplishment when an unarmed American can safely walk in the bazaar because the reformed local government is delivering peace and prosperity on the strength of its social contract with the governed. We will have forced change by playing to the native strengths and not wasting our resources in a forlorn hope of replacing its deeply ingrained cultural and institutional traditions. We will have understood and accepted that each side of the meeting table, with equal validity, views the other as strangely blind to the obvious. Directed or threatened violence is an indispensable component of effective diplomacy, so political leaders and soldiers will have beaten the odds together. **MR**