


# Of Burning Platforms and Champions

Cmdr. William Hines, U.S. Navy Reserve

*“The prevailing style of management must undergo transformation. A system cannot understand itself. The transformation requires a view from outside.”*

—W. Edwards Deming



ON 1 FEBRUARY 2012, while speaking to reporters about Afghanistan, then Defense Secretary Leon Panetta stated, “Hopefully by the mid-to-latter part of 2013, we’ll be able to make a transition from a combat role to a train, advise, and assist role.”<sup>1</sup> Secretary Panetta later retracted some of his comments about this accelerated timeline under political pressure. A Pentagon briefing two weeks later made clear that Operation Enduring Freedom was rapidly transitioning from combat operations to transferring responsibility of this current conflict to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).<sup>2</sup> Subsequent events at the NATO summit in Chicago in May 2012 confirmed this transition. This ongoing attempt at “Afghanization” relies heavily on American military advisors, with five brigades slated to provide hundreds of 18-man advisor teams. (Whether the U.S. military has the depth of talent to meet this requirement for warrior-diplomats is in serious doubt, but that topic is beyond the scope of this paper.)

*Cmdr. William Hines, U.S. Navy Reserve, is assigned to Strike Force Training Atlantic in Norfolk, Va. He recently returned from a tour as a military advisor with the 2nd Brigade Afghan National Civil Order Police in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. He holds a B.S. in engineering from the University of Virginia, an M.B.A. in finance from Indiana University, Bloomington, and an M.A. in national security and strategy from the U.S. Naval War College.*

What is being attempted in the wilds of central Asia will (and has) inevitably led observers to draw parallels with the ultimately failed “Vietnamization” effort of the early 1970s. While this paper does not advance claims of the current conflict in Afghanistan being another Vietnam, much of the language is strikingly familiar. Similarities include talk of halting the spread of alien and hostile ideologies, the need to deny the enemy cross-border sanctuary, and laments about the corrupt, unreliable, lazy nature of local allies, their fecklessness made even more aggravating by the contrast with the bold, imaginative, energetic élan of an enemy with the same cultural and ethnic makeup.

As the aforementioned transition continues (and may possibly extend past the formal withdrawal of combat forces at the end of 2014), it increasingly falls into the lap of the military advisor to comprehend why “those” Afghans are the stuff of a Kipling poem, while “these” Afghans are taking naps in the afternoon between bouts of hashish smoking in the morning and selling their American-issued gear in the evening, punctuated by the occasional murderous outburst. From this understanding it is hoped that a sufficiently robust ANSF can be trained and fielded to achieve the long-term American political goal of a relatively stable Afghanistan that is able to rebuff the encroachments of the odious Taliban and its Al-Qaeda camp followers, while also accomplishing the near-term (and politically more important) objective of withdrawing U.S. forces.

A daunting task to be certain, but fortunately, the advisor does not stride forth into this land of confusion unprepared. The American military has gone to a great deal of effort and expense to train its advisors before sending them abroad (I attended the Combat Advisor course at Fort Polk, La. and can attest to the thoroughness and quality of the training.) These courses typically provided rudimentary instruction in language and culture, counterinsurgency doctrine, negotiation techniques, simulated key leader engagements with native Afghan role players, and combat skills.

However, fine training fails to address the salient question of why, after over two combined decades of advisory involvement in Vietnam and Afghanistan (not to mention dozens of less prominent experiences) with countless dollars spent on equipment and countless hours spent on training, the

local armies were and are seemingly so incapable of answering the bell.

More simply put, it does not answer the oft-repeated lament of the Vietnam trooper: “Why are their ‘gooks’ so much better than our ‘gooks’?”<sup>3</sup> As expected from the American military, our training regimen presupposes that the answer lies wholly with us and our efforts. If only we spoke the language more fluently, knew the culture more thoroughly, negotiated with more finesse, drank the chai with more gusto, ate the local cuisine with fewer grimaces, then maybe, just maybe, we would finally discover the much sought-after key and at long last be able to unlock the puzzle box of the native psyche.

*...it has become commonplace for the seemingly disparate worlds of the warrior and the merchant to look to each other to draw lessons on management, leadership, organizational structure, logistics, and a host of other issues.*

---

Unfortunately, as laudable as the attempts to better our cultural understanding are, our efforts alone cannot produce the desired results. We must acknowledge that most if not all of the systemic pathologies of the Afghan Clausewitzian triangle of people, government, and military (like the South Vietnamese before them and a lengthy list of candidates on the verge of anarchic collapse ahead of us) are beyond our capacity to affect. The Afghans must reform themselves. The best an advisor can possibly hope to do is to hew to the counsel of that famed and influential thinker in the field of business process improvement, Dr. W. Edwards Deming, and provide a view from the outside much as he did in his pioneering work in post-war Japan in the 1950s.

The military advisor’s burden often seems a forlorn cause, especially to those of us who have had

the dubious (and hazardous) pleasure of working directly with the Afghans. It is well to remember that around the world on a daily basis thousands of external civilian advisors, armed with the precepts of Deming and his numerous successors, grapple quite lucratively with the task of reforming dysfunctional organizations, staffed with recalcitrant individuals and guided by antiquated precepts. Of course, we are referring to business consultants. It may seem unusual or inappropriate to draw such a direct linkage between military advising and business consulting, but over the past many years, it has become commonplace for the seemingly disparate worlds of the warrior and the merchant to look to each other to draw lessons on management, leadership, organizational structure, logistics, and a host of other issues. Indeed, elite business schools extol the virtues of Sun Tzu, the military injects six-sigma process controls into its operations, and the professional reading lists for soldiers and sailors contain numerous titles from the world of commerce. Thus, it is time for the military to understand how bankrupt companies are made solvent, how ailing divisions are made well, and, regrettably, how some firms are recognized as beyond redemption and liquidated for their residual value.

It is in the realm of the business consultant that we will find two key concepts that must be present to successfully reform any organization. These concepts are the “burning platform” and the “champion of change.” The veritable cottage industry of essays issuing forth from Afghanistan, penned by conscientious, well-trained, observant officers speaking to the enduringly dreadful state of affairs in the ANSF, are a tacit recognition of the absence of these two concepts. Without these two pillars in conjunction, all efforts to build a robust ANSF are doomed to failure, with Afghans merely agreeing to perfunctory changes to secure momentary favor or avoid momentary discomfort. The answer to why the Afghans will not change is contained in their absence: they see no reason to alter their ways, and even if they did, there is no one to lead the reform.

### The Burning Platform

*“It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.”—W. Edwards Deming*

The metaphor of the burning platform was first coined by Daryl Conner in his book, *Managing at the Speed of Change*. He recounted the experience of a survivor from the catastrophic fire on the



Members of the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) receiving comms training at the Joint Regional ANSF Center, Kandahar Province, March 2012. (photos courtesy of author)

Piper Alpha oil rig in the North Sea, in July 1988 that killed 167 of the 228 crew members. To save himself from the flames, the worker leapt into the frigid, turbulent ocean below. As Conner described it, “He jumped because he had no choice—the price of staying on the platform, of maintaining the status quo, was too high.”<sup>4</sup> As the metaphor goes, leaving the platform (i.e., changing one’s way of doing things) will be painful because one must take a dangerous plunge from a great height into icy waters with no guarantee of survival. The alternative? Certain incineration. In short, no one jumps off one’s platform (the status quo ante) unless the cost of remaining on it becomes prohibitively expensive or deadly.

Even so, despite the seemingly irresistible logic of the metaphor, many will still accept a fiery demise rather than risk a leap into the unknown, perhaps hopeful that the conflagration will somehow extinguish itself or a rescuer will materialize to save the day.

On the face of it, the very term “burning platform” implies issues that should be stark and self-evident. In business, the quarterly report offers a grim prognosis: earnings are down, revenue is flat, expenses are soaring out of control, rivals are devouring market share, shareholders are enraged, and creditors are pounding on the door demanding payment. In short, the firm is in a crisis, its woes on display for the entire world to see, especially if the company is prominent and publicly traded. In the military realm, where things cannot be so neatly (if not deceptively) summed up in a ledger, the wages of failure are even harsher. One’s forces are crushed on the field of battle, or one has reason to believe that would be the case if it ever came down to a test of arms. Lives are lost, treasure squandered, sacred territory plundered, and national pride humiliated.

Yet upon closer examination, one will quickly discover there is no consensus of what actually constitutes the burning platform. The finance office will opine that the marketing department is not doing its job properly. Marketing will in its turn insist that they cannot sell the company’s product because its designers are two steps behind the competition, and even if they were two steps ahead, the assembly line is spitting out unreliable junk the consumer does not trust. The conversation with the manufacturing department reveals that the finance department will

not invest in new equipment to replace the current archaic system. In frustration, the consultant turns to make the walk back to finance to begin the cycle of conversation anew.

This grossly oversimplified example merely demonstrates how difficult it can be to identify the root cause or causes of any organization’s difficulties. Militaries are no different, for all of the same organizational challenges are present as in a business, yet the challenges are compounded by the fact that one never really knows how proficient one’s fighting force is until it actually fights, and unlike a typical business that goes about its concerns on a daily basis, wars are rather infrequent. In the aftermath of defeat, fingers point in all directions. Indifferent generalship, poorly trained troops, obsolete equipment, outdated doctrines, hostile media, and spineless political direction—a burning platform exists, but very often, when the entire world is ablaze, it is difficult to tell where the flames are coming from.

Currently all anecdotal and empirical evidence ranging from articles of personal experiences to the formal Commander’s Unit Assessment Tool suggests that we are failing in our goal of transferring security responsibility to a capable ANSF. The Afghans go about their daily business with no sense of urgency, no sense that a burning platform exists in the form of a zealous Taliban foe coupled with the inevitable reduction and withdrawal of American and NATO support. Indeed, our own American “can-do” hyperactivity may aid and abet an Afghan delusion that change is not required. Additionally, in our minds, the burning platform is self-evident: the Taliban. However, in a country permeated with ethnic, linguistic, and tribal divisions, all evidence suggests that the Taliban is just one of many potential adversaries (or allies, for that matter) for the numerous proto-warlords that currently lead the battalions, brigades, and divisions of the ANSF to consider.

## **The Champion of Change**

*“The worker is not the problem. The problem is at the top! Management!”—W. Edwards Deming*

As history has demonstrated all too vividly and repeatedly, and current events in Afghanistan are proving anew, the presence of a burning platform alone is insufficient to push an organization toward

change. Out of selfishness or simple wrongheadedness, individuals and groups often ignore all signs that change is upon them and that they are in peril of being left behind as the world changes about them. Typically, members need an influential individual to push them off the burning platform into the uninviting waters below. “The consultant must have a strong internal leader/change champion to support her efforts. This would be the individual, clearly accepted and respected by the organization’s members, who would speak up (and speak first) to highlight the change’s positive elements.”<sup>5</sup>

Without doubt, the consulting business is prone to a frothy jargon that makes the critic rightly wonder if the practitioner has an original thought in his head or if he is merely spouting the latest canned buzzwords. A phrase like “champion of change” may especially cause the reader in uniform to ask, “What is this nonsense? The military is already full of leaders.” Unfortunately, being a leader and being a champion of change are two separate entities, especially when one considers there is generally a link between military promotion and upholding the status quo, not for agitating for reform.

As an example, in 1906, the Austrian Army conducted a series of maneuvers before the watchful and anxious eyes of the Hapsburg emperor, the octogenarian Francis Joseph I. By this point in time, the polyglot Austro-Hungarian Empire, not unlike Afghanistan, was already under great pressure internally from its numerous ethnic divisions and externally from rapacious neighbors like Italy and Russia. Worse yet, there was little regard for the Austrian army throughout Europe. This combination of internal feebleness and external aggression should have provided a sufficiently incandescent burning platform to have driven the Austrians to be on the lookout for any advantage, receptive to any innovation, “[but] when the vehicle [an armored car] scared the horses of the imperial suite, Francis Joseph, visibly annoyed, declared that ‘such a thing would never be of military value.’”<sup>6</sup>

Naturally, Francis Joseph was neither the first, nor the last not to recognize the implications of onrushing technological innovation. It seems that, often, only disaster can spur much-needed reforms in both business and war, though even then it is not a certainty.

As an aside, the need for a champion of change is not to suggest that this champion will be correct or his quest for change laudable. History is rife with misguided initiatives for change (societal, business, or military) that led to disaster (Mao’s Great Leap Forward perhaps being the bloodiest example). Thus, it is not the purpose of this paper to examine whether any particular desired end-state for the ANSF, be it an emphasis on light infantry units, heavy mechanized formations, or teams of time-traveling cybernetic organisms, is appropriate or not. Such a debate, especially within the Afghan apparatus, would be highly laudable. However, there is no evidence that any such conversation is taking place.

### Whither the Platform? Whither the Champion?

*“I think that people here expect miracles. American management thinks they can just copy from Japan—but they don’t know what to copy!”*

—W. Edwards Deming

So what are the consequences of missing these two essential pillars of reform? As of the latest round of the now discontinued Commander’s Unit Assessment Tool (note: the CUAT has been replaced by the Regional Command ANSF Assessment Report [RASR] as of September 2013) reports in July 2013, only 257 of 827 combined units in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police received the highest rating, that being the oxymoronic “Independent with Advisors.”<sup>7</sup> At the ministries of interior and defense level, only two of 78 staff sections or cross-functional areas received the CM-1A rating of being capable of autonomous operations.<sup>8</sup> To see only 31 percent of the ANSF and 2 percent of the staff sections receive their highest respective ratings is discouraging after a decade of American and NATO tutelage and a disbursement of \$60.28 billion on Afghan reconstruction out of \$96.57 billion appropriated by Congress—and all this from a nation renowned for its warrior ethos.<sup>9</sup>

However, even these dismally low ratings may be overly optimistic. An audit by the DOD Office of the Inspector General noted, “The Commander’s Unit Assessment Tool did not capture the capability and effectiveness of ANA logistics and maintenance systems at or below the corps level. As a result, the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command was unable to adequately measure



ANCOP explosive ordnance disposal team member practices trouble shooting an MMP-30 EOD robot at Joint Regional Afghan National Police Center, Kandahar Province, June 2012. (photos courtesy of author)

progress toward the development of an enduring logistics and maintenance capability in ANA corps, brigades, and *kandaks* (battalions).<sup>10</sup> In other words, the very skills that the Afghans will need to stand on their own after the withdrawal of coalition forces have gone unmeasured. Additionally, anecdotal evidence throughout Afghanistan paints a grim picture of their readiness. As one observer noted, “Entering this deployment, I was sincerely hoping to learn that the claims were true: that conditions in Afghanistan were improving, that the local government and military were progressing toward self-sufficiency. . . . Instead I witnessed the absence of success on virtually every level.”<sup>11</sup>

If we accept that Afghan forces are woefully unprepared for “Afghanization” and that they lack both a burning platform and a champion for change, then it is incumbent upon us to discover why this is the case. While illiteracy and corruption usually top most lists of challenges to superior, sustained Afghan performance (and UNESCO

estimates the literacy rate of ANSF as a whole to be a stunningly low 14 percent), these are of secondary, even tertiary import.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly literate soldiers are easier to train, especially given the requirements of modern equipment, but this is to suppose that the advantage of the Taliban is in fielding vast hordes of college-educated troops, who spend their evenings waxing eloquent over Persian poetry. As for corruption, it is merely the by-product of a patronage culture that selects officers based primarily on political and familial connection and fails to enforce accountability.

None of this should come as a shock to us. In a parallel with Vietnam, the root of this failure traces back to the Afghan officer class and harkens back to Deming’s admonition that the problem with organizations is always at the top. “All senior advisers found little improvement in South Vietnam’s officer selection and promotion systems, and, while some discussed slight improvements in leadership, all agreed that this remained a serious problem.”<sup>13</sup>

A later historian would quantify how serious the difficulty was. “The greatest obstacle in improving and training the armed forces . . . was the lack of qualified leadership at all levels, both officer and noncommissioned officer . . . battalion and company commanders were often inexperienced and lacked initiative, few operations were conducted in the absence of detailed orders. Senior commanders issued directives, but failed to supervise their execution, and results were usually negligible. American advisers continually cited poor leadership as the foremost reason for unit ineffectiveness. But with the lack of replacements, unsatisfactory commanders were seldom relieved.”<sup>14</sup>

The first problem arising from the lack of qualified leadership is that there will be no identification of a burning platform as the products of a noncompetitive selection system will merely be placeholders or rent-seekers. The second problem is that any champion of change, who might fortuitously arise from the otherwise unpromising swamp of Afghan leadership, will find himself stymied, rendered impotent by the difficult if not impossible challenge of removing both the merely incompetent and those resistant to change. Finally, the lingering influence of Russian doctrine, especially among the higher ranks, will retard the appearance of any champions in the first place. Unfortunately, the opportunity to reform the Afghan officer class has probably long since passed.

## Conclusion

The goal of “Afghanization,” even if never formally defined, will be virtually identical to that of “Vietnamization”: to allow the United States to withdraw from a costly military effort no longer deemed essential (and possibly considered counterproductive) to the national interest by turning over security responsibility to a properly trained and equipped local national force.

Even if one rightly rejects the notion that there is an inexorable repetition to history, the rapid and ignominious collapse of South Vietnam in 1975 must certainly give pause to American policy makers who most certainly do not wish to see the Taliban return to power. Moreover, they do not want Afghanistan to turn into a recuperative haven for Al-Qaeda, which has already shown its resiliency post Bin-Laden with its efforts in the Benghazi consulate attack and the Syrian civil war. To prevent this, today’s military advisors, much like their forbearers in Vietnam, are hard at work in Afghanistan, struggling to prepare the ANSF to assume their national duty. These efforts are made in the face of illiteracy, corruption, indifference, incompetence, laziness, and treachery.

However, all of this diligent effort will be for naught if we do not shift our advising focus from the mere mechanics of tactics and administration to the higher plane of process improvement. In this regard, an understanding of the business consulting concepts of the burning platform and the champion of change is not just useful, it is essential.

As a final thought, lest one think that military advising is a fool’s errand, always destined for failure, consider the experience of the Continental Army. In the winter of 1777-1778, this battered force received its first military advisor, the Prussian Baron Friedrich von Steuben, who introduced the first manual of arms to American forces. The “burning platform” was the need for Continental units to stand firm in the face of highly trained and well-disciplined British and Hessian infantry. And making sure that all of this happened during that long, miserable winter in the face of naysayers who said back-wood colonials could never learn and critics who saw the specter of dictatorship in the creation of professional American soldiers was General George Washington, America’s first champion of change. **MR**

---

## NOTES

1. Mathieu Babeuchault, “U.S. to end combat role in Afghanistan in 2013: Panetta,” *Agence France-Presse*, 2 February 2012.

2. Robert Burns, “DOD offers details on shift in Afghan mission,” *Associated Press*, 15 February 2012.

3. Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 61.

4. Daryl Conner, *Managing at the Speed of Change* (New York: Random House, 1992), 94.

5. Anthony Buono, ed., *The Changing Paradigm of Consulting: Adjusting to the Fast-Paced World* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2011), 143.

6. Stuart Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph* (Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1998), 127.

7. Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, *Report to the*

*United States Congress*, 30 July 2013, 97.

8. *Ibid.*, 99.

9. *Ibid.*, 78.

10. Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, *Report to the United States Congress*, 30 January 2012, 70.

11. Daniel, L. Davis, “Truth, Lies and Afghanistan,” *Armed Forces Journal* (February 2012).

12. *Report to the United States Congress* (January 2012), 76.

13. Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973, The U.S. Army in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), 343.

14. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 169-70.