

Afghanistan: counterinsurgency or colonialism?

Americans bring Afghans their new 60-year plan

DOUG SAUNDERS
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NARAY, Afghanistan — To get to Naray, which may be the most lawless place in Afghanistan today, you have to make the long journey up the sniper-filled Kunar River Valley from Jalalabad to Asadabad, where the road ends, and then hitch a ride on a Black Hawk helicopter to this outpost in the far northeast, near the Pakistani border. Here, in the hills, you will find 200 wild-eyed U.S. Army soldiers living in a cluster of tents, sheltering themselves from regular rocket attacks.

I was greeted in a swirl of dust by Lieutenant-Colonel Christopher Kolenda, a clean-cut, steel-eyed officer in the 173rd Airborne, who dragged me into a large tent filled with other officers. They promptly began one of the key battlefield tactics of the new American military — the two-hour PowerPoint presentation.

"The heart of the matter here, as we see it, is a socio-economic dislocation," Col. Kolenda told me, before quoting at length from Kaffirs of the Hindu Kush (Sir George Scott Robertson, 1900) and explaining in detail the anthropology and tribal politics of this region, including some new research he had commissioned from the U.S. government's elite squad of battlefield anthropologists, better known as Human Terrain Specialists.

"There's been an atomization of society here — the elders lost control over their people, and a new elite of fighters came in to fill the vacuum, so what we need to do out here is to re-empower the traditional leadership structures," he continued.



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Globe and Mail correspondent Doug Saunders (*Deborah Baic/The Globe and Mail*)



"As you can see here," he said at one point, "as you approach the possibility of self-sufficient development, then you reach what I'll call the developmental asymptote, which is the point we're striving to reach."

This, I pointed out, was not the sort of talk I had expected from the 173rd Airborne, an infantry brigade known for its battlefield ruthlessness. Here at the headwaters of the river, I felt I had encountered some latter-day Colonel Kurtzes, losing themselves in Cartesian twists of logic amid all the mud and dust.

"This is all really new," acknowledged Major Erik Berdy, who had been reading Queen Victoria's *Little Wars* (Byron Farwell, 1972). "Before, it was totally high-intensity conflict, that was all we discussed. The mental dynamics we have needed to readjust our mentality have been quite dramatic — before, it was 'find, fix and finish' and the change required to go from there to asymmetric

have been quite dramatic — before, it was mind, fix and finish, and the change required to go from there to asymmetric development-focused counterinsurgency has been quite a mind shift."

It certainly is quite a mind shift, one that may have occurred five years too late. When fellow North Atlantic Treaty Organization nations such as Canada are told about plans to "re-Americanize" the Afghanistan war, this new thinking is central to the plan.

The Petraeus doctrine

Within the U.S. military, this is known as population-centric counterinsurgency, an approach that has a cultish following among some officers. It was attempted and then dropped in the Vietnam War (the infamous "strategic hamlets" were at its centre) and there are still officers who believe that Vietnam would have been won if counterinsurgency had been practised to the end.

One of its strongest advocates happens to be General David Petraeus, who has just become the head of the U.S. Central Command, making him responsible for both the Iraq and the Afghanistan wars.

In practice, I found, it looks and sounds a lot more like old-fashioned colonialism. In the tents of Naray, I had the distinct feeling that I had strolled into Uttar Pradesh at some point after 1858, in the early days of the British Raj.

Here, far more so than in the Afghan south, where Canada and Britain are fighting, officers were taking command of entire societies, in hopes of purifying the cultural oxygen that produced the Taliban.

"Our goal," one officer tells me, "is to rebuild the government and society from the ground up in our model."

That means that these officers have to have big pots of money piled up beside their big guns.

Their tool is the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), which in this small province gives the commanding officers an impressive \$37.3-million (U.S.) to spend on society-rebuilding programs — similar to what aid organizations would do, if they were allowed out here, but much more closely tied to military goals.

(The Canadians, by comparison, keep their Provincial Reconstruction Team somewhat separate from the fighters — this, I'm told, creates confusion in Kandahar, since Afghan leaders don't understand why the guys with the guns can't deliver a new mosque.)

Farther down the valley from this camp, I came across teams of Afghan men in blue uniforms building roads, bridges and mosques, all under the watchful eye of GIs in armoured vehicles. They are being paid the equivalent of \$5.50 an hour, which is a huge sum in Afghanistan — and happens to be 50 cents an hour more than what the Taliban pay for fighting.

The goal, though, is not to create U.S. government jobs for all the potential fighters — the Americans are occupying only a tiny sliver of this province, after all.

No, the Americans here are trying to do what they should have done in Iraq five years ago: using former fighters to create enough of a counterbalance of goodwill to tip the scales in favour of their side.

"Our road, bridge, school and health-facility strategy is designed to separate the enemy from the people — it's central to counterinsurgency," says Commander Dan Dwyer of the U.S. Navy, who runs the provincial reconstruction team just to the south, in Asadabad.

"Because of this infrastructure, we've pushed [the Taliban] out of population centres, up into the hills."

Tough love

Lest anyone think this is a soft or peaceful process, Cdr. Dwyer's base was rocked, every minute or so all day, by the terrifying shock of its line of 155-mm howitzers firing their village-destroying shells over the hills and into the Korengal Valley.

The building of mosques and roads is matched with absolutely ferocious fighting in places such as Korengal — the Americans are much more willing to use air strikes and heavy artillery, with the resulting heavy civilian casualties, than other militaries.

There are good reasons to be suspicious of this approach.

"We do not believe in counterinsurgency," a senior French commander tells me. "If you find yourself needing to use counterinsurgency, it means the entire population has become the subject of your war, and you either will have to stay there forever or you have lost."

The Americans obviously see it differently.

"We're trying to raise the opportunity cost of picking up a weapon or growing poppy," says Alison Blosser, a Pashto-speaking State Department official.

(The Americans, unlike Canadians or Brits, have a surprising level of co-operation between their foreign-affairs people and their military

officers these days.)

"We want to get to the point where there's long-term sustainable employment that leads to economic growth. ... If the insurgents do decide to come back, they will face a great wall of resistance from a population that has experienced economic development."

It sounds good. But I should mention that eastern Afghanistan is facing the highest military casualty rate in the war's history at the moment, and a British report has just concluded that their heavy-handed poppy-eradication strategy is creating hundreds more Taliban fighters.

I ask one officer how long it is going to take to make this new strategy bear fruit.

"Look," he says, "we're still in Germany and Japan 60 years after that war ended. That's how long it can take. I fully expect to have grandchildren who will be fighting out here."

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