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# Why Counterinsurgency Fails

## The US in Iraq and Afghanistan

Dennis de Tray

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*To my wife Mary, who made it all possible.*

# FOREWORD I

Author of *Resilient Warriors*, *Resilient Leaders*, and *Resilient Nations*

Get ready for an invaluable journey to the heart of insurgency by a unique author. Dennis de Tray, having demonstrated expertise around the globe in high-level international development, turned to US security policy and practice in Afghanistan and Iraq. He has “been there, done that” firsthand in our nation’s recent counterinsurgency efforts. Now he has applied keen analytical skill to suggest how to beat the next insurgency. This book will be a valuable tool for future international development advisors, for military commanders employing such advisors, and for policymakers wrestling daily with the likely prospect of insurgency conflict for decades to come.

*Why Counterinsurgency Fails: The US in Iraq and Afghanistan* is a memoir by a longtime World Bank expert. It describes his work in 2010 and 2011 as a member of an assessment team in Iraq and as an advisor to the 173rd Airborne Brigade combat team in Afghanistan. The book argues the benefit of routing economic assistance through the local government to build its capacity and increase its popular support. Dennis’s unique biography reflects not only familiarity with our nation’s most influential counterinsurgency thinking—particularly that of David Petraeus and H. R. McMaster—but also the experience of serving with those same players in counterinsurgency battle zones. *Why Counterinsurgency Fails* presents the nexus between theory and practice in one author and one book.

Dennis provides a candid, and often humorous, description of his dive into unfamiliar Army culture and practices late in life. For him to put himself in harm's way demonstrated tremendous personal gumption and a deep commitment to our national security. In addition to wearing uncomfortable "battle rattle"—Kevlar helmet, flak vest, and so on—and navigating strange military acronyms, Dennis faced frequent mortar and rocket attacks, passed through improvised explosive device-laden roads and villages, and risked snipers keen to take out the command groups he traveled with. In my estimate, his actions displayed the highest of army values (loyalty, duty, respect for others, selfless service, honor, and personal courage).

Exhibiting the power of fresh eyes, Dennis gives an unbiased and introspective assessment of US counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as of the international development policies he espouses. His candor speaks equally to the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Finally, as one who spent over 30 years at every level in our nation's military, I greatly appreciate Dennis de Tray's recognition of the quality of America's sons and daughters who sacrifice daily in today's military. We have asked so much of them for so long. The war in Afghanistan, America's longest, has been pursued at great personal and professional cost to these soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and guardsmen. Our author's willingness to serve side by side with them has given him a unique appreciation of their talents.

Strap on. *Why Counterinsurgency Fails* will be a fun, productive, interesting, and provocative journey into one of the most significant national security challenges our nation will face throughout the twenty-first century.

Round Rock, TX, USA

Robert F. Dees  
Major General, US Army Retired

## FOREWORD II

I first met Dennis de Tray in the summer of 2009 as our unit, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, was preparing for a yearlong deployment to Afghanistan. My friend Jay Baker, the brigade's doctor, had worked with Dennis in Iraq. Thinking Dennis could be helpful to us, Jay brought him to the brigade.

Immediately upon meeting Dennis, I was struck with how knowledgeable he was about international development. His decades of experience were unmatched by anybody in Afghanistan. His expertise would apply directly to my position as the brigade's civil affairs officer. Combining Dennis's development experience and my military experience led us to develop the People's Development Fund, which proved to be a great concept. Though the concept never fully matured because our unit rotated out of Afghanistan, the lessons survive and could apply elsewhere with the same kind of success.

Our work together was a wonderful experience. Dennis helped us make great strides toward stabilizing Wardak and Lowgar provinces, and I learned a great deal from him. When Dennis asked me to write a foreword for his book I was both flattered and humbled.

*Why Counterinsurgency Fails: The US in Iraq and Afghanistan* accurately depicts the events of the 173rd Airborne Brigade from 2009 through 2010 as I remember them. I was very happy to be able to read such a great account.

Airborne!

Waterloo, Belgium

Bo Stuart  
Lieutenant Colonel, Special Forces



## PREFACE

In the past five decades, the United States, the world's mightiest military power, has lost three wars: Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Lost, in the sense that none ended as the United States wanted. The Vietnam War, the United States flat out lost. Iraq and Afghanistan, when the United States and its partners withdrew, sank back into chaos. Those countries and the world were left no better off than before, and possibly worse off, at a very high cost in lives and resources. As of mid-2018, Afghanistan seemed to be a war that will not end—almost a defining characteristic of an insurgency.

This book sets out lessons I learned late in life about two great challenges to world order: the defeat of insurgencies and the promotion of development in the world's poorest and weakest countries. Those fragile states are often the breeding ground for insurgencies. The lessons come from a combination of four decades working on international development and two periods late in my career working with the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When I went to Iraq in 2008, I was in my mid-60s. I'm an economist by training (Ph.D. University of Chicago, 1971). I spent my career working on international development, especially in fragile states. After a stint at the Rand Corporation, the Santa Monica, CA, think tank, straight out of graduate school, I spent two enjoyable and educational years in Islamabad on leave from Rand under the auspices of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) as the international

research advisor to the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics at the Quaid-i-Azam University just outside Islamabad.

The late 1970s were good times for Pakistan, before Islamic fundamentalism took root and before the Soviet war in Afghanistan. I could drive my family to Kabul, Afghanistan, in my very ordinary civilian vehicle, a Dodge station wagon. The two years in Pakistan set the course for the rest of my life by instilling two passions in me: a fascination with international development and an interest in exploring new lands and discovering new cultures.

Fortunately, Mary, my extraordinary wife of more than 50 years, shares the second of those passions and has a deep interest in art and culture, which gave her a focus in many of the countries in which we lived. In Hanoi, for example, during my assignment there with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) she started the Friends of Vietnam Heritage Society. The society is still going strong, more than I can say for the programs I helped develop in Vietnam, which says something about the staying power of culture and heritage versus policy programs.

On returning to Rand from Pakistan in 1978, I launched a new center for the study of the role of household behavior in economic development. In 2003, I received a call from Anne Krueger, then the World Bank's chief economist, asking if I would take over a similar project at the Bank, the Living Standards Measurement Study. I wanted to be closer to the action, to do rather than just write about policy, so I made the move.

At the World Bank, I spent my last 12 years outside Washington: five years in Jakarta as the Bank's country director for Indonesia; two years in Hanoi on leave from the Bank as the IMF senior country representative; and five years as the Bank's regional director for Central Asia, stationed in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

In 2006, after 23 years at the Bank, I hit the mandatory retirement age of 62. I continued to work on development, first from 2006 to 2008 at the Center for Global Development, a Washington DC-based think tank started by a longtime friend and colleague, Nancy Birdsall. In 2008, I resigned to become a freelance consultant.

How did I become an advisor on counterinsurgency in my mid-60s? Four decades' work on economic and social development had convinced me that the world would never achieve security unless the international development community became more effective at working in fragile

states. But the international community's current approaches were ineffective and frequently counterproductive.

My interest in counterinsurgency and its relationship to development began in Iraq, in the Governance Assessment Team (GAT) led by then-Colonel H. R. McMaster in Iraq in March 2008 (Chapter 1). My interest in fragile states led to a newfound fascination with counterinsurgency—the purported approach the US military took in Iraq and Afghanistan and had less formally taken in Vietnam. (On Vietnam, see McMaster's 1997 *Derelection of Duty* and Rufus Philips's 2008 *Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned*, a discussion of that earlier counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam.)

Later in 2008, I was a member of the CENTCOM Assessment Team formed when General David Petraeus became commander of Central Command (Chapter 3). That three-week experience led to several tours in Afghanistan from late 2009 through early 2011, working with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Lowgar and Wardak provinces.

Working directly for and with the military gave me a distinctly different perspective on difficult development settings from the one I was used to as a member of the international development community. To my amazement, the military also gave me more room to explore new approaches to difficult development settings than had the World Bank.

The military perspective confirmed insights I had previously developed. The mistake the international development community often makes in fragile states is imposing too much assistance for a weak national system to absorb. I came to believe that in Iraq and Afghanistan, and before that in Vietnam, the US military and US government made the same mistake. They did so despite the emphasis of the military's stated counterinsurgency strategy on supporting the host nation government in nurturing its legitimacy with its own people. This occurred even when David Petraeus, author of the latest version of the military's counterinsurgency strategy, came to be in charge.

Washington, DC, USA

Dennis de Tray

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My greatest debt, after the debt to my wife, is to my 173rd Brigade Combat Team colleagues, most especially, Colonel James Johnson. They supported me unstintingly in trying to change how the army implemented counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. I owe H. R. McMaster a huge debt for introducing me to counterinsurgency and the army, Colonel Johnson for taking the risk of bringing me on board, and David Petraeus for listening to my ideas.

Although the thoughts and opinions expressed herein are mine alone, many individuals contributed to their development, including Larry Napper, Jeremy Pam, Jim Johnson, Bo Stuart, Jay Baker, John Lister, and Dawn Liberi. The governors and subgovernors of Lowgar and Wardak provinces who first implemented the program we designed were also key, particularly Governor Mohammad Halim Fidai of Wardak and Engineer Mohammad Rahim, district governor of Baraki Barak.

I also thank my editor and friend, Bruce Ross-Larson, and his colleague, Joe Brinley, for their patience and support.

The first foreword is by Robert Dees, Major General, US Army Retired, a much-published author on leadership and an experienced military policymaker. He represents one of the audiences I am most eager to reach. The second is by Bo Stuart, Lieutenant Colonel, Special Forces, who was one of my most important military colleagues in Afghanistan.

## PRAISE FOR *WHY COUNTERINSURGENCY FAILS*

“In the 1990s many argued that America’s technological prowess would deliver fast, inexpensive victories in future war. They forgot that war is fundamentally a contest of wills. Winning that contest requires not only convincing the enemy that he is defeated but also consolidating military gains to achieve sustainable outcomes consistent with political goals. The United States and its allies relearned these lessons the hard way in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Dennis de Tray has uncovered those lessons in a compelling way. This book is no academic treatise. Dennis brought with him to both countries unparalleled international experience and a penchant for insightful analysis. This is an important book because as the historian Conrad Crane observed, ‘we have never been able to never do this again.’”

—H. R. McMaster, *Author of Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam, Lieutenant General, retired*

“The counter-insurgency industry is awash with theories, most of them wooden and mutually contradictory. Dennis de Tray is that rare analyst who subjects his conclusions to review in the light of changing evidence. The result is an engaging and deeply insightful analysis, a must-read for practitioners and theorists alike.”

—S. Frederick Starr, *Chairman, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, AFPC*

“*Why Counterinsurgency Fails* is written by someone unique: one-part World Bank economist and one-part US military adviser. The book is an important contribution to the biggest challenge that is going to be with us for the next 30 years: how can the US and the international community ‘fix’ fragile states? Dennis de Tray is the only person in the world who could have written this book.”

—Daniel F. Runde, *William A. Schreyer Chair, and Director, Project on Prosperity and Development, Center for Strategic and International Studies*

“Strap in. *Why Counterinsurgency Fails: The US in Iraq and Afghanistan* will be a fun, productive, interesting, and provocative journey into one of the most significant national security challenges our nation will face throughout the 21st century.”

—Robert F. Dees, *Major General, US Army Retired, Author of Resilient Warriors, Resilient Leaders, and Resilient Nations*

“I highly recommend that everyone read this compelling story about a unique American hero—Dr. Dennis de Tray. Dennis left the relative safety of his professional world to serve on the front lines with America’s brave service members in Afghanistan. His innovative solutions solved complex problems and saved American lives!”

—Jim Johnson, *Former Commander, 173rd ABCT*

“Dr. de Tray immeasurably aided the 173rd ABCT as the brigade’s Economic and Governance advisor during our deployment to Afghanistan in 2010. His mastery of development, combined with a fearless approach to implementing it on the battlefield, built a program that quickly began to reap rewards for, and bring peace to, the villages and districts of Lowgar and Wardak provinces.”

—Col. Jay Baker, *SOCEUR Command Surgeon, Previously Brigade Surgeon, 173rd ABCT*

“*Why Counterinsurgency Fails: The US in Iraq and Afghanistan* provides a unique first-hand and on-the-ground perspective of challenges faced by governments and international organizations in trouble spots around the world. This book provides a historical analysis of the efforts, failures, and successes in counterinsurgency over the last two decades. Dennis de Tray’s

story is bold, surgical and brutally honest. The personal narrative draws in readers as if we were on the battleground and in meetings along with the writer. But the book provides much more than one person's report of historical facts. Above all, it's probably the best manual available with practical information on how to win the hearts and minds of people in areas of deep-rooted conflict. A 'must read' for anyone who wants to make this world a better place."

—Patrick Duparcq, *Dean, Graduate School of Business, Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan*

"De Tray makes the point that we will need new tools to fight the conflicts we are likely to engage in over the next few decades. His is a compelling argument for the need of a coherent development strategy to be in place next to and working with our military strategy."

—John Lister, *Former Senior Civilian Representative, Department of State, Lowgar and Wardak Provinces*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Dennis de Tray** following a 12-year stint at the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica California, Dr. Dennis de Tray joined the World Bank's Research Department in 1983. He is now a principal with the Results for Development Institute and a senior non-resident associate with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, both in Washington D.C. He is also Advisor to the President, Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# How It Ended in Afghanistan, How It Started in Iraq

**Abstract** De Tray describes high-level military enthusiasm, which produced no lasting effect, for expanding a development program, the People's Development Fund. The program aimed to strengthen ties between the Afghan people and their government, a prime objective of counterinsurgency strategy, by shifting accountability for development projects to Afghan provincial and district governments from the international coalition led by the United States. De Tray had developed and piloted the program with the 173rd Airborne Division in two provinces of Afghanistan in 2009–2010. In a briefing, David Petraeus, then commander of the US Central Command, and John F. Campbell, commander of forces in the region of Afghanistan where the pilot took place, both urged that the program spread. But that did not happen. De Tray also describes his recruitment to the team, its civilian and military makeup, its meetings both inside the Green Zone in Baghdad and throughout the country, and its recommendations. The team's first recommendation was that the coalition encourage the Iraq government to take ownership of the development program, overcome political obstacles to progress, and create pathways for advisors in government institutions.

**Keywords** Afghanistan · Counterinsurgency · ISAF · NATO · Iraq Government Assistance Team · Rule of law

## CLOSE, BUT NOT TO BE

I start toward the end of my story, at a briefing that followed more than a year of working with the 173rd Airborne Brigade under the command of Colonel James Johnson in Afghanistan's Wardak and Lowgar provinces. With the 173rd, I had developed and tested a new approach to implementing "COIN," the counterinsurgency strategy developed by General David Petraeus.

It was now showtime. On 12 August 2010, we were to brief General Petraeus, Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, and 70-plus Kabul-based senior US, coalition, and Afghan officials on the approach, the People's Development Fund.

The People's Development Fund was a new contribution to implementing counterinsurgency strategy. By giving local governments the ability to serve their people, it strengthened the link between people and their government. This was a pillar of US counterinsurgency strategy in principle if not practice. Though other programs under the US-led coalition claimed to do the same, the People's Development Fund went much farther than similar efforts in putting local governments in charge.

The briefing took place under extraordinarily tight security in Maidan Shar, the capital of Wardak Province, about 35 kilometers from Kabul. If the insurgents landed a rocket on the tent where the briefing took place, they would have won a huge psychological gain and given a devastating blow to coalition and government leadership, not to mention the de Tray clan.

Although the meeting was kept hush-hush, the arrival of a stream of Blackhawk helicopters in a relatively small provincial capital was a tip-off that something big was in the offing. So, even with all the security the 173rd had put in place, the insurgents were not to be denied. As the briefing began, the audience could hear mortar explosions, close enough to be noticeable, but not so close as to interrupt the proceedings.

Petraeus, who was giving his welcoming remarks when we heard the first mortars, never flinched. The rest of us took our cue from him: we acted nonchalant, casually adjusting our flak jackets, helmets, and so on.

In the end, in a war zone, one is either a fatalist or a nervous wreck. Over my time in Afghanistan, I had become a consummate fatalist. If my number was up, so be it, and if not, no point in worrying.

The most nervous person at the briefing, I suspect, was Colonel Johnson, since he and his brigade were responsible for security. The days

preceding the event had been a blur of dry runs—where the helicopters would land, how the 173rd would transport parties to the briefing area, where the different parts of the briefing would be held, how to secure the area around the briefing site, and much, much more. In a war zone no detail is too small.

My part of the briefing took place in the provincial government center's library, where the brigade had placed two podiums, several whiteboards, and a projector and screen. A fundamental law of military briefings, I had learned, was that they required PowerPoint presentations, the more complex, the better.

My briefing focused on the People’s Development Fund, the program we developed during the 173rd’s 2009–2010 deployment in Lowgar and Wardak Provinces (Map 1.1; Chapter 4 describes the People’s Development Fund in detail). It aimed to better implement Petraeus’s counterinsurgency strategy by building on my knowledge of the mistakes



**Map 1.1** Afghan Provinces (*Source* Central Intelligence Agency)



the international development community had been making in fragile states for decades. It was in its early implementation stage at the time of the briefing but was showing signs of success.

The People's Development Fund was designed to meet the primary counterinsurgency objective of strengthening the ties between the Afghan people and their government. It did this by shifting accountability for delivery of development projects from the international coalition and the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) to provincial and district governments. Shifting accountability is essential to successful counterinsurgency.

To emphasize Afghan ownership of the program, I had asked Governor Mohammad Halim Fidai of Wardak Province to give the briefing. The governor's English was excellent, and he gave a lucid presentation. Most important, by making the presentation, he signaled that the People's Development Fund was his program, demonstrating the Afghan ownership that was central to its approach to counterinsurgency.

Petraeus was enthusiastic about the People's Development Fund, which built on work I had done for him in Iraq under the guidance of then-colonel H.R. McMaster (see this chapter and Chapter 2). Petraeus brought key Afghan ministers, including the ministers of defense and interior, to the briefing. Afterward, they discussed the prospect for expanding the program nationally. Petraeus's second-in-command, General David M. Rodriguez, commander of International Security Assistance Force Joint Command (IJC) and deputy commander of US forces in Afghanistan, also participated.

Petraeus said that the People's Development Fund was exactly the sort of thing the coalition needed to deliver on the recent Kabul Conference agreement between the Afghan government and government and institutional donors, in which the donors agreed to increase the amount of assistance passing through Afghan government systems. Putting money through the Afghan government was a major challenge (see Chapters 3 and 4). Over the course of the war, less than 20% of coalition development assistance in Afghanistan passed through government channels.

Shortly after that, General John F. Campbell, the commander of Regional Command (RC) East—the area of operation in which the 173rd worked—sent a note to all the region's brigade commanders saying, why aren't we doing the People's Development Fund throughout RC East?

So, momentum appeared to be building. The day I saw General Campbell's note, I thought we'd done it: we had created something that would make a difference in counterinsurgency effectiveness throughout Afghanistan and would give the US-led coalition an exit strategy from a war that was already one of the longest in US history (as of 2018, it is the longest).

Momentum or no momentum, the program did not expand. The People's Development Fund did not even survive the transfer of responsibilities from the 173rd to its successor in Wardak and Lowgar, the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (the 4/10th).

How much of this outcome was the system's fault versus mine is an open question. I am sure both factors were at work. *Why Counterinsurgency Fails* will describe aspects of the Iraq and Afghan war efforts that thwarted adoption of the People's Development Fund model. I was unable to push the program forward despite access to most of the top military and civilian leadership in the US part of the coalition.

## THE HOOK: IRAQ'S GOVERNANCE ASSESSMENT TEAM, MARCH 2008

The Afghanistan development strategy drew on lessons from my 2008 participation in the Governance Assessment Team (GAT) in Iraq. The GAT reviewed US reconstruction and development in Iraq after the formal end of combat in 2003. Its conclusions emphasized that the US-led coalition should bolster the Iraqi government so that Iraqis would see their own institutions, not the coalition, as capable of delivering public goods. And local government, closest to the people, was the place to start. Those key insights would lead to the People's Development Fund.

My Iraq engagement started with a phone call from Larry Napper in February 2008. Larry had been the US ambassador to Kazakhstan when I was in the country's capital, Almaty, as the World Bank's regional director for the five Central Asian republics from 2001 to 2006.

Larry had been called by Ambassador Charlie Ries, then at the US embassy in Baghdad as the minister for economic affairs and coordinator for economic transition in Iraq. Ries asked Larry to lead the civilian side of a civilian-military group tasked with casting fresh eyes on the coalition's governance and development programs in Iraq. The task group was being organized at the request of General David Petraeus,

commanding the Multi-National Force—Iraq and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, US Ambassador to Iraq, in response to the gains seen after the recent military “surge.”

Larry was concerned about asking me—Iraq was, after all, a war zone. He said, Think about it and let me know—and I will understand if you say no. When I hung up, I explained the request to my wife and asked, “What do you think?” Without hesitation, she replied, “Iraq is the single most important development challenge in the world today. You’ve devoted your entire professional life to development. Of course you will go.” And so, my counterinsurgency career was launched.

The task force, the GAT, was to start work in less than a month after Larry’s call. By then I needed a contract, a security clearance, and plane tickets. And to learn about Iraq, the coalition’s development and governance programs there, and the military’s approach to counterinsurgency. So, there was no time to waste.

I got an early sense of Petraeus’s power and Iraq’s importance when my secret clearance was completed in six days rather than the usual six weeks. It may have helped that I once had a security clearance at the Rand Corporation.

Out of a strong sense of survival, I met Larry on my way to Bagdad since I had no idea just how I was going to get into Iraq, or what I would do when I got there. It had been easy to say yes to an adventure in the comfort of my own home, but considerably harder to make it happen when reality hit.

The GAT’s core team was made up of Larry Napper, head of the civilian side; Patrick Fine, former USAID director in Baghdad; Jeremy Pam, a Harvard-trained lawyer who had negotiated Iraq’s debt relief package and had spent a year in Baghdad as the US treasury attaché in 2007, and me (Box 1.1).

Colonel H.R. McMaster headed both the military side and the entire effort. H.R. was one of Petraeus’s go-to colleagues, and the GAT was but one of his many special Petraeus assignments. Rounding out the military team were Lieutenant Colonel Ricky Waddell, a senior reservist whom H.R. often used for such special assignments; Lieutenant Commander Sean Henseler, a navy JAG (judge advocate general—a navy lawyer); and several others.

**Box 1.1 Members of the Governance Assessment Team from 1 March to 29 April 2008**

Colonel H.R. McMaster Codirector  
 Ambassador Larry Napper Codirector  
 Mr. Dennis de Tray Economic development  
 Lieutenant Colonel Rick Waddell Economic development  
 Mr. Patrick Fine USAID representative  
 Dr. Toby Dodge Governance development  
 Mr. Jeremy Pam Treasury representative  
 Commander Sean Henseler Rule of law representative  
 Major Patrick Reynolds Executive officer  
 Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Landers Planner/integrator  
 Mr. Oubai Shahbandar Analyst  
 Mr. Rob Barocas Analyst  
 Major David Jones Integrator  
 Mr. Claude Keissieh Cultural advisor

I owe H.R. a great deal. He was kind enough to accept me into this group and to serve as my teacher on all things military. He is tough-minded and stubborn, and we didn't always agree, but he always listened. A soldier, a gentleman and, I am proud to say, a friend.

H.R. is a prime example of the extraordinary people one meets in today's US military. He is a West Point graduate and holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of North Carolina. *Dereliction of Duty* was his Ph.D. thesis. Rumor has it that his thesis advisor, worrying that the military would blacklist H.R., asked him to tone it down, but that H.R. refused—no surprise to those who knew him, I am sure. As a result, I understand, Petraeus had to intervene personally to get H.R. his first star, and even then it came later than most people who knew H.R. thought it should.

H.R. is an intellectual, a natural leader, and a soldier's soldier. As a tank commander at the Battle of 73 Easting during the 1991 Gulf War, he and his command delivered a definitive victory even though they were outnumbered five or six tanks to one (Gresham 2011). H.R. is now a well-deserved three-star general. He served as President Trump's national security advisor in 2017–2018—undoubtedly his toughest assignment yet.

The GAT held a series of meetings in the Iraq Green Zone—the 10-square kilometer area in central Baghdad that was the coalition's government center, also known as the International Zone (Box 1.2).

These were all US government—not military—meetings. Most civilian US government agencies were present in Baghdad. Technically, they all worked under the guidance of ambassadors Crocker and Ries, but they were more or less independent agents mainly answerable to their sending agency. Also, many coalition-funded consultants were present. The Iraq government was overrun by them, and the US government relied heavily on them to deliver its programs, reflecting the difficulty of getting civilian s to go to Iraq.

**Box 1.2 Green Zone US meetings of the Government Assistance Team, 2008**

1. Chief of Mission (COM), Ambassador Ryan Crocker
2. Coordinator for Economic Transition in Iraq (CETI), Ambassador Charles Ries
3. USM-I Political Counselor, Matthew Tueller
4. Political Officer, James Miller
5. USM-I Economic Counselor, Todd Schwartz
6. Health Attaché, Dr. Bruno Himmeler
7. Treasury Attaché, Mr. George Smith
8. Transportation Attaché, Mr. Michael McCormick
9. Joint Strategy, Plans, and Assessments
10. Iraq Transition Assistance Office
  - a. Director, Mark Tokola
  - b. Chief of Staff, Vincent Azzarelli
  - c. Deputy Operations Director, COL Lusardi
  - d. Senior Consultant on Communications, Mr. Bob Fonow
  - e. Senior Consultant on Electricity, Mr. Terry Barnich
  - f. Senior Consultant on Science and Technology, Mr. Paul Savello
  - g. Senior Consultant on Housing and Construction, Ms. June Reed
  - h. Senior Consultant on Rule of Law, Ms. Rachel Roe
  - i. Senior Consultant on Oil, Mr. John Nicole
  - j. Senior Consultant, Water Resources, Public Works, Dr. Linda Allen
  - k. Senior Consultant to Ministry of Justice, Ms. Rachel Roe
11. Rule of Law Coordinator, Mr. Philip Lynch
12. Office of Provincial Affairs

The military side of the GAT was an extraordinary group. Both Petraeus and McMasters had reputations so strong that no one said “no” when asked to join anything they set up. And they could get virtually anyone released from their regular duties.



Fig. 1.1 Blue Blazer and Flak Jacket. From the left: Wadell, me, McMasters

As for me, one of my first lessons as a budding soldier was how to get a flak jacket on over a blazer (Fig. 1.1). As my time with the military went on, the blazer, a vestige of my World Bank days, disappeared.

Most of those posted to Iraq during the war, both civilian and military, saw very little of the country. Many never ventured outside the Green Zone, home to most of the international communities' headquarters. And many of those posted on forward operating bases went no farther beyond them than a few kilometers on patrol.

I was more fortunate. The GAT, given its assignment, was expected to visit most of the 25 provincial reconstruction teams that the coalition had scattered throughout Iraq. That and the fact that Petraeus and H.R. were running the show made us able to travel far and wide in Iraq (Box 1.3; Map 1.2).

**Box 1.3 Government Assistance Team meetings outside the Green Zone, 2008**

1. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT)
  - a. Baghdad
  - b. Dhi Qar
  - c. Muthana
  - d. Maysan
  - e. Basrah
  - f. Anbar
  - g. Salah ad Din
  - h. Diyala
  - i. Kirkuk
  - j. Ninewa
  - k. Erbil
2. Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams (EPRT)
  - a. 3 Brigade Combat Team (BCT)/101st Airborne Division
  - b. 4 BCT/10th Mountain Division
  - c. 2 BCT/101st Airborne Division
3. Battlefield Circulations
  - a. Multi-National Division—Baghdad (MND-B)
    - i. Rusafa
    - ii. Karkh
  - b. Multi-National Division—Central (MND-C)



- i. Salman Pak
- ii. Iskandariyah
- iii. Al Hillah
- iv. An Najaf
- v. Al Kut
- c. Multi-National Division—Southeast (MND-SE)
  - i. Contingency Operating Base (COB) Adder
  - ii. Regional Embassy Office (REO) Basra
- d. Multi-National Division—North (MND-N)
  - i. Diyala
  - ii. Salah ad Din
  - iii. Kirkuk
  - iv. Ninewa
  - v. Tal ‘Afar
- e. Multi-National Force—West (MNF-W)
  - i. Fallujah
- f. Multi-National Force—North East (MND-NE)

The travel was exhilarating, essential, and exhausting. By the time the GAT was ready to pull together its recommendations, energy and patience were running low. H.R. and I had words one evening toward the final days of the GAT effort. He was going on about how he wanted to “change” the minister of oil (a bad guy, I admit). I mentioned for the umpteenth time that we all had to remember that this was not our country. He went on a rant about how we are at war, that defeat is not an option, that we have to do what we have to do.

Annoyed, I said to him, H.R., we can argue about instruments, about how to do things, but don’t ever again question which side I am on. This crap about you being a soldier and the rest of us holding you back is nonsense, and I don’t want to hear it again.

H.R.’s response said more about the pressure we were under than anything else: “If that’s the way you feel, let’s step outside and settle this.”

H.R. is a beef of a guy, no neck, bald head, career military, outweighing me considerably, and 15–20 years my junior. My response was pure self-preservation—No way I am going anywhere with you in your current frame of mind. We both settled down, and work went on. One of my colleagues, Jeremy Pam, said afterward, Dennis, thanks for taking one for the team—H.R. needed to hear that. I am happy to say that H.R. and I have been friends ever since.





Map 1.2 Iraq (*Source* Central Intelligence Agency).

Although I have to smile when I recall this story, I have come to realize that it tells more than I initially saw. H.R. is as smart and analytical as they come (witness *Dereliction of Duty*), but he is also a soldier to his core. His military upbringing pounded into him the “win at any cost” ethos that military leaders must have.

While the gap between coalition and Iraqi cultures was wide, so too was the gap within the coalition between military and civilian cultures.

### BACK IN WASHINGTON: THE WRAP-UP BRIEFING

We briefed General Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker in a videoconference in April 2008 after I returned to Washington (Box 1.4). Our end of the briefing took place in a secure conference room at the Pentagon.

#### **Box 1.4 Government Assistance Team recommendations**

(An unclassified version of our recommendations to Petraeus and Crocker.)

The key to helping the GoI (Government of Iraq) improve governmental performance and accelerate the development of institutional capacity is to place Iraqi institutions and systems at the center of an integrated and focused advisory effort. The coalition, in coordination with the GoI and international organizations, focuses on Iraqi leaders, administrative systems, and finance as the principal vehicles for development.

1. *Encourage GoI ownership of the development program, overcome political obstacles to progress, and gain access for advisors in critical governmental institutions and economic nodes.*
  - a. Use political competition in run-up to 2008 provincial and 2009 national elections as an incentive to support the development program.
  - b. Use intelligence outreach to Iraqi counterparts to influence as well as inform. Work with Iraqi intelligence agencies to produce briefings and products for cooperative GoI leaders that expose the actions of malign actors and organizations within government institutions and economic nodes.

- c. Develop and implement a strategic communications and information operations campaign to increase social pressure through Iraqi and regional media. Include a positive information campaign highlighting those ministries and provinces that are making progress and producing results.
  - d. Increase international pressure to decrease corruption and incentivize improved governmental performance.
  - e. Assist and encourage the Iraqi government in contracting for international expert advice.
  - f. Help GoI empower directors-general (DGs) and insulate government functioning from malign organizations and undue political pressure.
  - g. Simplify and standardize GoI oversight bodies and regulations to help reduce the climate of fear and decision paralysis which exists throughout provinces and ministries.
2. *Defeat militia and malign organizations' ability to control state institutions, functions, and economic nodes.*
    - a. Intelligence effort, diplomatic effort, and IO [information operations] campaign to target malign actors in governmental institutions.
    - b. Focused and sustained effort on reforming the facilities protection service in problem ministries.
    - c. Initiate civil service reform with an effort to remove "ghost" employees.
    - d. Improve area security in Rusafa to provide unimpeded access to ministries.
    - e. Restore legitimate governmental control over the delivery of basic services in Baghdad.
  3. *Improve the ministerial advisory effort and help provide "connective tissue" between ministries and between the provinces and the central government.*
    - a. Develop objective-oriented plans based on Iraqi priorities that integrate programs and advisory efforts. Recognizing that many of the problems faced by individual ministries are a result of the systemic failings in central governance processes. Therefore, coordinated action to resolve these should be the initial approach adopted rather than each ministry developing workaround solutions.

- b. Establish a Public Finance Management Assistance Group (PFMAG) with a permanent secretariat to work with the GoI to address systemic failures within central government processes, to enable Iraq's substantial financial resources to work, and to connect coalition provincial and ministerial advisory efforts.
- c. Shift advisory and technical assistance efforts from neighborhood, district, and provincial councils to directors-general from the service ministries.
- d. Encourage GoI to pursue advisory and maintenance provision contracts with international expert firms.
- 4. *Remove bottlenecks to improved service delivery and employment.*
  - a. Focus on budget execution, by working with the GoI to identify and rectify the systemic failings within central government processes which are key causes of low execution.
  - b. Assist line ministry operational and capital budget execution, ensuring it operates effectively within GoI processes and identifying those areas of central government process that cause delays.
  - c. Urge the prime minister to direct that provincial budgets be allocated as block grants that are the responsibility of provincial officials; end the minister of finance practice of allocating small percentages of the budget in a halting, unpredictable manner.
  - d. Reinvigorate advisory effort in neglected ministries that are critical to service delivery and employment (e.g., education, health, MoCH [construction and housing], MoMPW [municipalities and public works]).
  - e. Urge GoI to increase provincial capital budget allocations and, in the near term, provide operational funds to provinces to compensate for dysfunction in service ministry execution.
  - f. "Network" the ministerial advisory effort to help GoI improve interministerial coordination; focus on cross-cutting ministerial institutions.
- 5. *Remove self-imposed constraints.*
  - a. Establish a Washington DC-based coordinator for Iraq assistance to improve efficiency and reduce redundancies.

- b. Achieve the same degree of civil–military cooperation at the national level that exists at the local level.
  - c. Align political, coalition military/PRT [provincial reconstruction team], and ISF [Iraq security forces] boundaries.
  - d. [Multinational Force—Iraq] assumes movement and security responsibilities for all co-located PRTs and ministerial advisors.
- 6. *Reorient the ministerial and provincial advisory efforts.*
  - a. Select advisors who have experience in capacity building in developing countries.
  - b. Ensure advisors, providers of technical assistance, and military officers know and understand the Iraqi system.
- 7. *Emphasize the use of Arabic speakers and indigenous consultants and technical advisors. Over time, internationalize and indigenize the advisory effort. Transition PRTs to Iraqi development assistance teams.*
- 8. *Accelerate strategic projects and improve the business environment.*
  - a. Accelerate key strategic infrastructure projects (e.g., ICAO [UN International Civil Aviation Organization] certification, Umm Qasr south port, oil and electricity technical support agreements).
  - b. Improve access to credit.
  - c. Assist GoI in establishing an oil fund.
  - d. Promote regional and global trade linkages (e.g., ICI [International Compact with Iraq], World Trade Organization, Gulf Cooperation Council, Arab Monetary Fund).
- 9. *Reduce corruption and promote the rule of law.*
  - a. Help the GoI implement its January 2008 18-point anticorruption plan and support UN [United Nations], World Bank, EU [European Union], and OECD [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development] anticorruption efforts.
  - b. Emphasize and encourage the GoI to institute social defenses to corruption, especially transparency in budget execution.
  - c. Influence the GoI to implement its amnesty law, rapidly and humanely process alleged criminals, and reduce the legal impediments to economic growth and foreign direct investment.

Although the briefing was an interesting experience, it said more in the end about the dysfunctional US civilian side in Iraq than about the GAT report itself. In summarizing our recommendations, we each spoke briefly. After all, we had two of the world's busiest men facing us from Baghdad.

Petraeus spoke next. He praised the report and the work that produced it. He singled out three or four recommendations that he wanted at the top of the list for implementation. His choices were smart, showing that he knew the report and had thought about what he wanted from it.

Then Crocker spoke. The ambassador was also complimentary, though more muted and less specific. He said that there were some good recommendations and that his staff would follow up.

In principle, that ended the briefing. But as we were getting ready to leave, Crocker's deputy chief of mission leaned into the table—so that the camera could see her. She said, essentially, wait just a moment, we need to study this report before we agree to anything. We will get back to you.

This right after Crocker had just said we should move ahead. If the ambassador could not control his number two, how was he going to control the rest of the US civilian side?

So, the GAT's takeaway from the meeting was that although we were probably on the right track, the odds of concrete action in Iraq were very long because of too many vested interests, too little coordination, and too little ability to manage the nonmilitary side.

As one GAT member put it, the civilian side saw the GAT as a Trojan horse to give the military an even greater role in Iraq. However, the GAT's main message was the need for more Iraqi ownership, not military ownership, while recognizing the need for a continued military presence in the governance and development side of counterinsurgency. The need for a civilian counterpart to hand off programs to was, in fact, treated as crucial in the counterinsurgency manual written by Petraeus and James Amos (US Army and US Marine Corps 2007).

We thought that our recommendations put pressure on the mission, but we saw little commitment from the two key people on the Embassy side, the deputy chief of mission, and the coordinator for economic transition in Iraq, to undertake the heavy lifting required to tackle the deep-seated institutional problems we identified: fragmentation, incoherence, lack of accountability, ineffective advisory efforts, and self-imposed security constraints.

I commented that the briefing went very well and suggested that the resistance to the recommendations on the civilian side likely indicated

that we were touching on the right issues. And I praised Petraeus and the quality of the GAT.

With the Petraeus–Crocker briefing, the GAT effort formally ended. There was no official Iraq follow-up, not even the team reunion I had suggested.

But several of us went on to try to put into practice in Afghanistan what we learned in Iraq. The disregard of our Iraq recommendations was the main reason I was happy to participate in another counterinsurgency. Afghanistan proved an excellent laboratory for trying out and expanding our ideas and for learning more about why the US military was doing such a poor job implementing its counterinsurgency strategy.



## CHAPTER 2

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# Reflections on Iraq, 2008

**Abstract** De Tray considers the role of outsiders in postconflict reconstruction and development in Iraq in 2008. The coalition in Iraq attempted state building in a couple of years that development experts recognize takes decades and must be undertaken from within a society. The Provincial Reconstruction Teams, focused on using local governance and development projects to build links between people and government, were seen by Iraqis as foreign occupiers. US efforts were hindered since government experts avoided working in Iraq because of harsh living conditions, and contractors with inappropriate backgrounds were hired. The military, eager to deliver visible results, often bypassed the Iraqi government. Working with local governments—districts, towns, and communities—offers the best chance to strengthen people’s ties with their own government.

**Keywords** Iraq · State-building · Local government · Postconflict

### DEVELOPMENT, IRAQ STYLE

Imagine doing development with no constraints.<sup>1</sup> Build what you want to build; spend what you think you need to spend; hire anyone you want to hire, and then some. This description is only a slight exaggeration of the situation the military faces in doing development in Iraq. Of course, there is one overriding constraint: the security situation. But



development is being done, and in ways that are so far out of the box, one wonders if those doing it even know there is a box.

The army was undertaking experiments that are unique and that the development community may never repeat. The problem is that the world is losing the lessons they might provide for future counterinsurgency, reconstruction efforts, and international development, in the haste and turmoil that is Iraq.

I am not sure anyone will ever be in a position to evaluate what went on in Iraq that passed as development; in this essay, I try to help that process along by talking about some of the examples of unique or rare development experiments now under way in that country.

I am not an Iraq expert, but I have seen much of the coalition machinery at work inside and outside the Green Zone. I was privileged to spend March 2008 in Iraq as part of the Governance Assessment Team (GAT): a team of five military officers and five civilians put together by General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker tasked with reviewing coalition development and governance efforts.

Through the good offices of Commanding General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, we saw more of Iraq in that short time than almost any military or civilian personnel the US had stationed there, certainly more than all but a handful of visitors.

We met with all the key ministries in Baghdad, visited all the Baghdad provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs). We went south and west to Salmon Pak, Hillah, Najaf, Wassit, Kut, Basrah, and north to Ba'qubah, Tikrit, Bayji, Salah ad Din, Kirkuk, and Mosul (see Map 1.2 for the larger cities). In all, we met with over 100 government officials and 150 coalition PRT members.

What follows is part travelogue, part history lesson, part question asking, part solution seeking, all seen through the lens of international development, a different lens than the lens we usually use with Iraq. Of the ten people who made up the core GAT team of five civilian and five military, I was the nearest to a “pure” development person. I had spent nearly 40 years either researching development or doing development, first at the Rand Corporation and then at the World Bank in Latin America, the Caribbean, Pakistan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Central Asia, and East Timor. My lone-wolf status speaks volumes about how the coalition sees development in Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

What I learned from this extraordinary experience, and what I hope others will learn from this essay, is that while Iraq is unique, the coalition

experience there still holds lessons for the United States as it tries to get its foreign assistance and counterinsurgency acts together and for development practitioners more generally.

To bring out these lessons, I ask (and try to answer) four questions. The first has to do with what outsiders can and, importantly, cannot do in conflict and post-conflict states. What are the limits of state-building in these conditions? What are the pros and cons of different approaches to getting things done in these notoriously difficult environments?

The second question asks whether the right people were doing development in Iraq in the right ways and right places. The answer turns out to be much subtler than “yes” or “no,” with, I think, some clear and important lessons for how we need to work in post-conflict situations.

The third question asks whether outsiders can help with development if they have only limited access to the people they are trying to help, a serious problem where outsiders cannot take security for granted and where language and cultural differences often present communication barriers. Again, the answer is not straightforward and depends on where in the cycle of reconstruction, humanitarian assistance, and helping to get governments to work we are.

Fourth and finally, I ask what Iraq tells us about the way the US foreign assistance machine works—or does not work. Are the 3 Ds “defense, diplomacy, and development,” or “dysfunctional, disassociated, and dispirited?” (Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum 2010). I wrap up with what for me are the big takeaways from the trip.

### *What Can Outsiders Do When the Fighting Stops?*

President Bush’s 2003 “Mission Accomplished” speech marked the “official” cessation of fighting in Iraq and launched a massive, audacious, naïve, and arrogant effort to create an instant state. The goal was nothing less than to move from invasion and war to democracy and free markets in 18 months in a country that had been at the opposite ends of the governance and economic management spectrums for generations, centuries, even millennia.

Paul Bremer summed up the coalition’s hopes and aspirations in September 2003 by saying, “Democracy is on the march in this country.” To understand just how audacious the Coalition Provincial Authority’s (CPA’s) goals were, we need to delve briefly into Iraq’s history.

If there was ever a country that had a right to multiple personalities, it is Iraq. The land mass that now makes up modern Iraq has been, at one time or another, the crossroads of civilization, an often-occupied land, an isolated rogue state, and now a struggling democracy in the making.

In its glory days, the ancient civilizations in what is now Iraq led the world in development, creating irrigation, written texts, hanging gardens, and such architectural marvels as the ziggurats (Fig. 2.1), even though the region was host to near-constant conflict and invasion (Tripp 2002).

Modern Iraq was created by the British and French following the British capture of Baghdad in 1917. As William Polk writes in *Understanding Iraq* (2006), Britain's interests in Iraq at that time are eerily reminiscent of the US's interest today.

[I]n the diplomatic papers that passed between London and Delhi in the years before the war, the threat of what was then called "Pan-Islamism"



Fig. 2.1 Ziggurat of Ur

figure prominently. The [then] Allies—Britain, France, and Russia—dominated huge Muslim populations in Africa and Asia. Each feared that its subject Muslims might try to drive them out.

The Sepoy Revolt of 1857 provided the context that British political leaders of 1914 had studied. They dreaded what might happen in India in the event of war with the Ottoman Empire, in the name of which prayers for the sultan-caliph were offered daily by millions of Indian Muslims. Would they rise against his enemy at his call? Their British rulers feared that they would. They always believed that the masses of Asia were on the point of rising. Their security forces told them, as police officers are prone to do, that plots were being hatched almost daily all over India. Since the British officials already *knew*, “intelligence” was irrelevant.

This last sentence is eerily reminiscent of the discussions of weapons of mass destruction that preceded the 2003 Iraq War.

Iraq’s recent history is more widely known: the dark era of Saddam Hussein’s authoritarian rule, with its suppression of dissent, and centralized command and control. Then, almost overnight, Iraq was asked to embrace Western-style democracy. No wonder its people were confused.

Within weeks of the “official” cessation of fighting, Paul Bremer and his team were trying to put in place the facade of western democracy—but without elections, without a functioning government, and with people who had never lived under anything approaching democracy. As Rory Stewart (2006) says in his masterful firsthand account of the coalition efforts in Maysan and southern Iraq,

The CPA in the Green Zone wanted to build the new state in a single frenzy. Instead of beginning with security and basic needs and attempting the more complex things later, we implemented programs on human rights, the free market, feminism, federalism, and constitutional reform simultaneously. We acted as though there could be no tensions between the different programs, no necessity to think about sequencing or timing.

Stewart could have been writing about a great many post-conflict and fragile state donor efforts.

Five years into this process (2008), there is both progress and disappointment. In the face of incredible odds, a new Iraqi system of

government is beginning to take shape—haltingly, with more than the occasional stumble, but working.

The Iraq government's ability to function has an important and too narrow measuring rod: the degree to which it can execute its budget. In fact, "budget execution" became the catchword for the government's delivery capacity for our review team. Jeremy Pam, one of my colleagues on the GAT Iraq review mission, was the US Treasury attaché to Baghdad in 2006 and in that capacity led coalition efforts to give the government the institutional structure and skills needed to manage and move money. Jeremy gave our group a critical historical perspective. He often pointed out that even though things were still bad, the country had made progress in the one short year since the first time he left Baghdad.

There is visible progress, but there is also far, far to go. Official power and traditional power—and some not-so-traditional power—remain at loggerheads in many areas of the country. Partly this was a new government—old sheik split, partly a Shi'a–Sunni split, partly an intra-Shi'a power struggle, partly the overlay of gangs and criminality that inevitably follows conflict and plagues weak governments.

Within the government, the different elements of the system are still trying to understand their roles and how the various pieces of the government bureaucracy are supposed to fit together. Responsibilities remain unclear, sometimes overlapping, sometimes uncovered.

The security situation is constantly gumming things up. Province-based directors general, who are the linchpins in the public sector delivery process, often cannot get to or communicate with their counterparts and colleagues in Baghdad, and yet are dependent on a top-down system of government. Even in the absence of Saddam Hussein, Iraq leaned toward centralized government—a tendency the CPA unfortunately reinforced. Countries coming out of an insurgency are inherently ungovernable from the capital, so centralizing authority in Baghdad meant in effect that most Iraqis saw no government at work, a vacuum the insurgents were happy to fill.

The combination of an ancient and ongoing power struggle and a new and unfinished Iraqi government posed a classic development conundrum for the coalition when the fighting formally stopped. The Iraqi people had critical needs but were served by a government that had neither the capacity nor the cohesiveness to deliver.

With its huge military and civilian contingents, the coalition had excess manpower and money when fighting slowed. Under these circumstances, the temptation to substitute for the government, rather than work through it, was impossible to resist, and for the most part, the coalition didn't resist.

The coalition's resources, the need for immediate results on the ground, indeed, the country's need for progress, combined with the military's training and culture (give us a hill and we will take it; defeat is not an option), made going around the government inevitable. Unfortunately, going around a government is no way to build a government, another lesson often lost on the international development community.

Iraq has been a state-building experiment on a truly grand scale. That the experiment failed measured against the goals the CPA set for itself would not surprise most students or practitioners of international development.

States cannot be built from the outside, and certainly not in a couple of years. Those of us in the development business have always thought this to be true, but seldom has the world been willing to test the proposition with such determination. If Iraq has taught us anything, it is that state-building is a generational process and one that a country must drive itself.

If outsiders, whether coalition forces or more conventional donors, cannot build countries, what can they do in fragile, post-conflict states? They can work with governments to give countries the time needed to create functioning states.

State creation is a long, bumpy, windy, hilly road. The international community can determine neither the pace of travel along that road nor where the journey will end (this last point may have been one of the hardest for the United States to accept in Iraq). But there are things outsiders can do to fill potholes, straighten dangerous curves, and give a push up especially steep hills. What outsiders must not do is drive the process.

In 2003, President Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech announcing the end of major combat operations in Iraq. After that, the CPA was the government in Iraq, was the political process, was the treasury, was the implementer, and was, in the eyes of Iraqis, accountable for successes and failures.

You may sometimes be able to provide water this way, to fix infrastructure damaged by conflict, but you can't build a state. In some parts of Iraq, the coalition may even have succeeded in creating the facade of a state, but a critical element of a real state was missing: a bond between a people and their government. This lack of a bond is one of Iraq's most important lessons and one often lost on the donor community in its haste to move money to do good.

The challenge the coalition faced in Iraq differs in degree but not direction from the challenge donors face more widely in weak and fragile states—whether to do for countries and get the water flowing and the schools built now, but risk undermining government legitimacy and capacity? Or work through fledgling government systems, as bad as they may be, and accept that results will be slower in coming, and lower in quality when they do come? It is not an easy choice in the face of long-suffering poor people desperate for services and livelihoods, but it is a choice the donor community has to make nonetheless.<sup>3</sup>

Paul Collier, in his bestselling *Bottom Billion* (2007) and elsewhere, offers one way out of this predicament. He suggests that countries and donors establish independent service authorities, quasi-autonomous government agencies modeled after central banks. Their role would be to oversee subnational development efforts just as central banks oversee monetary policy. The independent service authorities would be outside the civil service, would not be implementing agencies, but would manage the flow of resources to provinces and districts and monitor outcomes.

Transparency and some degree of accountability are essential to any successful jobs and services program, and ISAs are one possible vehicle for providing them, although, by the end of my time in Afghanistan, I had become skeptical of the ISA concept.

The next section looks at an alternative to Collier's independent service authorities model, PRTs, which the United States is using in Afghanistan and Iraq. PRTs were first established to get things going outside Kabul and Baghdad, but suitably modified they could play an ISA role with the capacity to give day-to-day support to local authorities.

*Were the Right People Doing Development in Iraq in the Right Way  
and in the Right Places?*

In the five years since the war officially ended, the United States spent \$31 billion on “reconstruction and development” in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> About one-sixth of this money flowed through USAID.<sup>5</sup> Even counting contributions from non-US actors—mainly the UK’s development agency DfID and the World Bank—the majority of reconstruction and development assistance to Iraq in the past five years was managed by agencies and entities outside the official (US government) aid community. Even at the end of the reconstruction era (2007), the United States managed the largest share of development and reconstruction assistance through non-government agencies.

How did they do this? How did the coalition move so much money on reconstruction and development so fast? The military in the form of the Corps of Engineers provides a partial answer, but more was needed. In Iraq, the coalition turned to an experiment in another post-conflict arena, Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan in April 2003, the world was introduced to a “new” mechanism for providing development assistance, units called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). These new units were designed to provide a security umbrella for aid projects in dangerous areas and, as one early report put it, convey “legitimacy on the weak central government of President Hamid Karzai” (Kraul 2003).

PRTs are units made up of civilian and military personnel who in principle work with host country citizens and governments below the national level in areas in or just out of the conflict (Patrick and Brown 2007). In the initial design, PRTs were to focus on building links between people and governments through local governance and development projects.

After some skepticism, humanitarian agencies grew to accept these units and even to view them as valuable because they could implement development projects in areas where security concerns precluded work by traditional development partners. The United States in Iraq saw Afghanistan’s PRTs as so successful that the United States copied them in Iraq. As this chapter points out, after my time in Afghanistan, I did not see its PRTs as successes.

Early assessments of PRTs turned out to be wrong on two counts. PRTs have not been great at conveying legitimacy on either the Afghan



or Iraq governments; they may, in fact, have done the opposite because they were seen by citizens of the two countries as instruments of a foreign occupier rather than of a national government signaling more than anything the incompetence of the national government. With experience, at least in Iraq, international nongovernment organizations came to see PRTs as a problem rather than a partner. Where did the concept of PRTs originate?

The United States deployed PRTs in Afghanistan in 2003, but their origins lie in the Vietnam-era “Civil Operations and Rural Development Support,” or CORDS program (Phillips 2008). One should make comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam (or Afghanistan) with great caution, but some see CORDS as a benchmark against which to judge PRTs. In 2006, Phillip Carter of *Slate Magazine* wrote:

[In Vietnam], the United States created a unified organization to manage all military and civilian pacification programs, recognizing that only a unified effort could bring the right mix of political, economic, and military solutions to bear on problems....Although we copied some parts of the CORDS model in Afghanistan and Iraq when we created the PRTs, we did not go nearly far enough. It has become cliché to say that the insurgency requires a political solution; in practical terms, that means subordinating military force to political considerations and authority.

Carter gets it mostly right. The suppression of insurgency and creation of states do require a political, not a military solution. But “subordinating military force” requires someone on the giving end of the subordination. Later in this essay, I talk about how the civilian side of the USG effort measured up in Iraq.

In 2005, the United States extended the PRT model to Iraq with important differences from its Afghan form. In Afghanistan, PRTs were seen as an instrument to extend the reach of the central government; In Iraq, the idea was to help regional authorities with post-conflict reconstruction and to create jobs and improve services. PRTs were the coalition’s answer to weak central and provincial administration, and difficult communications and movement environments (Perito 2007).

There are also important managerial differences between Afghan and Iraq PRTs: military officers headed Afghan PRTs; in Iraq, in contrast, civilians led most PRTs (mostly US government, but three were

led by other coalition members, one Italian, one British, and one South Korean).

This “civilianization” of PRT leadership was a sensible idea—lower the military’s profile in Iraq and put PRT leadership in experienced civilian hands—but the security situation and civilian recruitment difficulties meant that for the most part, these goals went unmet.

Hands down, the most surprising feature of Iraq PRTs for me was their staffing. For many of those doing reconstruction and development there, Iraq was their first go at development. For many, Iraq was their first time in a developing country.

A lack of development experience among the military is not surprising—development is hardly the military’s day job—but that the coalition should staff PRTs with civilians who lacked development and developing country experience seems odd.

As my wife put it when she blessed my travels to a war zone, Iraq is not just any country; it’s one of the most important development challenges the world faced at that time. Surely, the United States and others would or should want the best development expertise available to do the job.

Even though it is not a development organization, the military does take development seriously. Counterinsurgency strategy is the military’s reaction to the changing nature of modern warfare. It is a philosophy of engagement beyond guns, teaching the military how to win hearts and minds. It is partly cultural—always eat with your right hand—partly manners—take off those mirrored wraparound sunglasses when you speak to an Iraqi...and smile—and partly lessons in community engagement.

The young men to whom the army entrusted this responsibility did an admirable job, but in societies such as Iraq, and Afghanistan as well, the populations revere age. So, the soldiers faced an uphill battle: they were too young, too inexperienced, were in military uniforms and were carrying big guns, and almost universally didn’t speak Arabic.

The counterinsurgency operations manual developed under General David Petraeus’s guidance is the bible.<sup>6</sup> It is good, sensible stuff (but see my critique of the counterinsurgency manual in Chapter 5), but it is not enough. When the challenge moves, as it must, from the coalition winning hearts and minds to the Iraqi government doing so, counterinsurgency training isn’t going to do the trick.

Getting Iraqis to perform better through their institutions with their money is an altogether different matter from getting the Iraqis to love, or at least stop hating, the coalition by repairing schools and building water treatment plants.

As I say, on the civilian side of the ledger, many of the civilian PRT members I met hadn't traveled to a developing country before Iraq, let alone worked or lived in one, let alone engage a developing country government on its development agenda.

When it came to attracting talent to staff PRTs following the cessation of open conflict, Iraq's "trapped in the Green Zone" reputation did not help. Things got worse following the 19 August 2003 UN headquarters bombing in Baghdad, when the usual suspects, the UN Development Programme, the World Bank, the major bilateral donors, were nowhere to be found.

Not surprisingly, the military concluded that if the coalition was to jump-start development, if the coalition was to build a country from scratch in 18 months, the coalition, and mainly the US military, was going to have to do it.

One problem the United States faced was that not everyone in the US government was enthusiastic about spending a year in an armed camp without family or much of anything else, under mortar fire on a regular basis. That may have been the life soldiers signed up for, but not so people from the State Department and other US government agencies.

With enormous pressure to get civilian boots on the ground and reticence on the part of State Department regulars (*New York Times* 2007), the main vehicle for civilian PRT staffing became Title 5, section 3161, of the United States Code. Section 3161 was a way for the US government to get around civil service regulations. It allows "temporary organizations" such as PRTs to hire staff through "temporary appointments" without having to go through US civil service hiring procedures.

The 3161s, as everyone calls them, come in all sizes, shapes, genders, ages, and backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> I talked to a lot of 3161 hires during my time in Iraq, but remember especially a conversation I had with three in the Diyala PRT.

Diyala Province was, at the time I visited, one of the few remaining Al Qaeda hot spots in Iraq. The United States embedded the Diyala PRT in Forward Operating Base Warhorse near Ba'quban, about 100 miles from the Iranian border, with a satellite office in downtown Ba'quban itself. The satellite was a small, high-security military outpost in an area still

bubbling with unrest, a tough place to live and hardly the most inspiring base for a development effort.

The four of us were chitchatting after a discussion with the team, and I wondered aloud what had brought them to Ba'quban. In some ways, their stories were different, in important ways the same. One was there because he had a son in the military, he was a patriot, but he hoped his son would not have to go to Iraq. So, he "volunteered" in the hopes that if he went and helped set things right, his son might not have to go. A second had been in the real estate business, saw the writing on the wall, or, more accurately, the tsunami that was about to hit that sector, and decided to try his hand at development, Iraq style. The third needed a job, plain and simple.

The three, however, did share three common characteristics: none was a development expert; none had been in a developing country before Iraq; none had been working in his area of specialization (urban planning, water engineer, power engineer respectively) before coming to Iraq. They were, in many respects, doing an amazing job, and I give them enormous credit for having the courage to work under difficult and frightening conditions, but it's hard to argue that they represented the experience profiles one might hope for given Iraq's challenges.

There were, of course, PRTs run by career State Department officials with the right experience and the right language skills. I remember especially the Ninewa PRT that served Mosul and surrounds. Terrific leadership, a staff with lots of Arabic language skills and overseas experience. But that PRT was more the exception than the rule—a lot more—and even those people had little development experience.

In the immediate post-conflict period, the skill and experience shortcomings found in many PRT staff did not seem to matter. Crash programs to fix what military conflict had broken, to clean up cities and towns, to get minimum services flowing, and to create public works jobs needed bodies, and almost anyone willing to brave the dangers and hardships of an Iraq would do.

But as circumstances changed from immediate post-conflict to just fragile and unsettled, the coalition and Iraqis faced a different challenge: how to shift the implementation of development programs from the PRTs and military-funded programs to the government and government-funded programs. This transition is essential in any post-conflict country, but the cost of the war and its oil wealth made it especially critical for Iraq.

In 2008, two forces were pushing the coalition to make the transition from doing to supporting. First, US taxpayers were increasingly upset with the bill for Iraq operations, a concern that has grown to outright hostility as the US economy headed south and Iraq's oil revenues headed north.

Recent reports showed Iraq's oil-generated budget surplus *increasing* by nearly \$50 billion in 2008 alone to something like \$70–80 billion. With next fiscal year's (2009) US budget \$500 billion, maybe much more, in the red, it's no wonder US taxpayers were saying enough is enough.

The second force is Iraq's budget. Even setting aside its burgeoning oil fund, Iraq has a well-funded government. Its 2008 budget came in at about \$42 billion, or about \$1700 for every Iraqi man, woman, and child (and that did not include a supplement of \$21 billion).

Compare that figure with other post-conflict countries—Liberia, for example, at \$57 per capita, Afghanistan at \$62, or even oil-rich East Timor at \$350 (all 2007 figures)—and you begin to understand why the issue for Iraq is not more money, but more capacity. What is needed is to get Iraqis to spend their own money and spend it, if not well, better.

In defense of the United States, according to the army's handbook, the original purpose of PRTs was to "improve stability in a given area by helping build the host nation's legitimacy and effectiveness in providing security to its citizens and delivering essential government services" (Center for Army Lessons Learned 2007). The handbook went on to say, "It is extremely important to link all PRT actions to governing bodies and local institutions as much as possible." And it warned, "As with any diplomatic, defense, or development institution, there is a danger that PRTs may fall prey to pressure to deliver immediate but inappropriate proxy indicators of progress, including the number of projects completed and quantity of funds expended." This is what happened, which simply deepens the mystery as to why PRTs did their assignment so badly.

And it is here that the PRT staffing issue begins to matter. Helping weak governments spend their money is a lot more difficult than building a bridge or a sewage plant, especially if you have access to the Army Corps of Engineers. The difficulty of working through weak governments is a point that the international development community has demonstrated for five or more decades.

How have PRTs fared as purveyors of development assistance? The troublesome answer is that we don't know. For all the money, people, and effort that have gone into Iraq's reconstruction, we have precious little in the way of evaluation.

My assessment admittedly relies mainly on my observations and anecdotes, but I filter those observations through a professional lifetime of international development work. The anecdotes fall on both sides of the balance sheet.

Take the famous water processing plant constructed by the corps of engineers in Nasiriya, the capital of Dhi Qar Province in south central Iraq. The plant, built at the cost of nearly \$280 million, has never operated above 20% of capacity, when it operates at all. The reasons for this dismal performance were wholly predictable: inadequate power, lack of qualified Iraqi staff, illegal taps into the transmission lines. Anyone with experience doing large water projects in countries with Iraq's characteristics would not—or should not—have failed to see these problems and designed around them.

There are many, many such stories in Iraq and more than a few in Afghanistan. A colleague in Kabul tells of a \$260 million power generation plant the United States is pushing that will generate electricity at a cost per kilowatt-hour 5–6 times the industry standard, with a monthly fuel bill of \$10 million, which the Afghan authorities have already said they can't or won't pay. Maybe there are worse things than water purification plants that do not purify water.

There have been efforts to assess the performance of PRTs more systematically, including by the US Congress Committee on Foreign Relations (US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 2005). These found some positive outcomes of the PRT process (for example that the Iraq government maintained macroeconomic stability in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, hardly a PRT outcome), but even these reviews highlighted signs of undermining the Iraq government, as the following suggests:

US policy and governance assistance to date was characterized by one official as “doing and directing.” For example, Iraqi participation in determining spending priorities for the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund and even the Development Fund for Iraq spending has been minimal.

Why does this happen? Why, with the best of intentions, does the coalition in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the international community elsewhere, get it so wrong so often in these difficult environments? My time in Iraq, bolstered by a visit to Timor-Leste, the tiny post-conflict country at the eastern end of Indonesia (de Tray 2008), led me to believe that the reasons fall under four broad headings.

### CONFLICTING TIME HORIZONS

David Petraeus is not a development guru, but he is one very smart commanding general. He was concerned that without visible results on the ground—more jobs and better services—the fragile gains in security the surge has achieved would not hold. He was right about that, which may explain why he stopped listening to development types.

When he asked development experts what he could do now, he was time and again given the same answer: capacity and institution building are long-term challenges, with progress measured over years, even decades; we do not have much to offer on how to deal with these in the short term.

I know—the development profession knows—that the development folks have a point, but so does General Petraeus.

His and Iraq's problem was not what the long term holds, but how to get to the long term. General Petraeus's concerns are hardwired into the psyche of those he commands, right down to the grunts on the ground.

Give people who win wars in a matter of weeks or months money, time, a leader demanding results, and, maybe, too little relevant experience, and the result is a water purification plant that doesn't work, or a power plant too expensive for the government to run.

Moreover, the short-term results Petraeus needed should have been delivered through the Iraqi system if they were to support the main objective of the counterinsurgency doctrine: linking people to their government.

### CONFLICTING CONSTITUENCIES

The coalition doesn't work for the Iraqi people. The dominant US component works for the US president, for Congress, and through them for the people of the United States. The US electorate is impatient, especially when it comes to the cost and casualties of a war that made little

sense to many of them in the first place. They want results, and they want them now. Fix it and get out.

The reaction to this pressure has been to throw more and more money and people at the problem. How much money, how many people? We don't know, but more must be better than less. And in any case, if we are putting lots of money and people into place and they fail, the world cannot blame us for lack of trying.

### INEXPERIENCE—OR WRONG EXPERIENCE

When I was at the World Bank, one of my perennial complaints was the difficulty I had getting the right people to work in difficult country settings. Based on admittedly nonscientific observations in Iraq and Timor-Leste, I believe that this problem is endemic to fragile states, in or out of conflict.

Right after the fighting stops, the military is there to maintain security and do reconstruction; international nongovernment organizations specializing in post-conflict humanitarian assistance arrive. But development people tend to stay away.

Shortly after the cessation of hostilities, the military begins to down-scale, and nongovernment organizations move on to the next crisis. But development agencies are often thin on the ground, especially outside the capitals, and then the capacity gap starts to bind. Since most post-conflict states hardly rank as garden spots, in addition to being flat-out dangerous, getting people to go to them is an understandable challenge.

One answer to this problem, evident in Iraq, is to cast the “expert” net more widely. Look for technical skills but don't worry about development or developing country experience.

As I have said, I saw this phenomenon at work in Iraq, but also in Timor-Leste, where there were Australian advisors aplenty, but for many, that very small, very poor country was their first developing country experience.

### ACCOUNTABILITY—OR A LACK THEREOF

Development is tough to measure. Institutions such as the World Bank have been struggling with that issue for decades. When you can't measure outcomes, you end up measuring inputs (projects, loans, grants,



technical assistance, money moved)—at least that’s what development institutions do. Iraq is an illustration of this problem in spades: we don’t know how to measure progress in a highly unstable, post-conflict situation, so the coalition followed the path of traditional development agencies, treating inputs—money, people, physical outputs—as equivalent to outcomes. We know they are not. The focus on inputs rather than outputs is especially true in a counterinsurgency environment.

Later I consider how the development community should have answered General Petraeus’s question, but first, a look at another feature of development, Iraq style: the interaction between the coalition and the government.

### CAN YOU HELP GOVERNMENTS WITH DEVELOPMENT IF YOU CAN’T SEE THEM?

James Wolfensohn, former president of the World Bank and ex-investment banker, once told a group of his country directors at the Bank that you can’t close a deal if you don’t have access and if the people on the other side of the table don’t trust you. He was suggesting that Bank staff could learn from the way his Wall Street firm operated. The coalition’s efforts in Iraq are testing this proposition. Development is being done there essentially by remote control.

In Baghdad, advisors see their government counterparts at most once a week, usually less often, and then for an hour, or two at most. Many of these weekly meetings take place through an interpreter, which means that an hour is a half hour and multiplies the opportunities for misunderstanding.

Security often means taking circuitous routes to counterparts’ offices, leaving even less time for the meeting. Once started, meetings can be rudely cut short by security overseers who insist it’s time to go.

In the provinces, the interactions with government counterparts are a bit surreal. I was in one meeting of directors general in Mosul, the capital of Ninewa Province. Directors general are the linchpin of the budget execution process, the folks who, in the end, make happen whatever does happen. We were asking the group to help us understand the bottlenecks and barriers to service delivery and job creation in the province, and how we might help make things work a bit better.

Try as we did, we could not get the discussion to move beyond security issues, as Mosul had recently moved to the wrong side of the security gradient. As I sat there, I looked up to see a young soldier standing by the side of the hall in which we were sitting.

He wasn't just there; he was there in full battle gear, flak jacket, helmet, long gun (rifle), and, of course, the ubiquitous wraparound sunglasses. A nice young man (I spoke to him afterward) but serious and all business.

Our Iraqi counterparts politely ignored our guard, but his presence made our appeals to ignore security issues and talk about budget execution ring a little hollow, even for me.

I hope it is clear by now that the big challenge the international community faces in Iraq is to balance the immediate need for jobs and services against the need for the fledgling government to be seen to function by the Iraqi people. The only way to meet this challenge is to work with Iraqi officials in the provinces on a regular basis and to do so below the radar screen.

My sense from our short visit is that working-level Iraqi officials are eager for support. They want to learn how other countries have solved similar problems; they want help making the new Iraqi budget execution system work.

The people in Iraq trying to provide these services have a problem. They are mostly US or European citizens with limited or no experience in settings similar to Iraq's and often no relevant language skills.

It struck me time and again that the right answer was to take the cry for South-South cooperation seriously. What Iraq needed were experts who had faced similar changes, who understood the culture, and who spoke the language. This thought suggests a push for regional expertise to support Iraqi officials, especially in the provinces. Regional experts would provide important advantages over the current crop of advisors. They would speak Arabic; they would blend in better with locals culturally and physically; they would bring experience far more relevant to Iraq's needs than rich country advisors do.

Vetting these regional experts would be tricky, but not impossible. All that is needed is a commitment by donors to work with Iraq's neighbors to develop a pool of approved experts and provide funding to hire them. They could initially be attached to PRTs and would be invaluable stop-gap measures until Iraq develops an expert cadre.

## WHAT DOES IRAQ TELL US ABOUT US FOREIGN ASSISTANCE?

Iraq should be the “whole of government” in action, the 3 Ds—defense, diplomacy, development—working side by side to bring home one of the administration’s highest foreign policy priorities. It doesn’t take a lot of time in the Green Zone to see that reality is a far cry from this ideal.

The 3 Ds are there in force, but hardly equal force, and certainly not coordinated. Defense has the upper hand. The military’s physical presence (boots on the ground), command structure, and resources and the country’s continuing security issues give it a natural advantage.

But the military’s dominance comes from more than an imbalance in resources. Put simply, General Petraeus was in charge of all military operations in Iraq. He knew it, and everyone from the newest recruit to the flock of three-stars who worked with him knew it.

Ambassador Crocker and his staff, on the other hand, were in a constant battle to coordinate his troops. Washington made budget allocations and staffing decisions, with coordination left to Baghdad.

My time in Afghanistan brought into question just how coordinated even the military is in a counterinsurgency war, but there is no question of a lack of coordination on the civilian side in either country.

The difference between military and civilian coordination in Iraq is not a matter of good military and bad civilian leadership. On the contrary, the civilian leaders in Baghdad were among the best the State Department had—experienced, dedicated individuals who lived and worked in difficult conditions. Fourteen-plus-hour days, seven-day weeks, little recreation, monotonous canteen food, half a trailer (if they are lucky) for a home, regular rocket attacks, and security restrictions that make interaction with Iraqi officials next to impossible. I was in Iraq for a bit over three weeks and left wondering how people do it for a month, let alone a year.

I came away with great admiration for the US civilians who work there, whether in Baghdad or out in the provinces, but that doesn’t mean the system was working. It was not. I found, though, that the message on whole-of-government<sup>8</sup> coming out of Iraq is not all negative.

The worst of the problems were in the Green Zone. With no “commanding general” who has budgetary and personnel authority over US government nonmilitary activities in Iraq, programs are a hodgepodge of contradictory and overlapping silos and competition. These silos were

built in Washington and were unassailable by the time they arrived in Baghdad.

Possibly the worst of these was USAID. You would think that as the security situation settled down in Iraq, as more traditional development challenges move up the priority ladder, USAID would become the go-to agency. Not so: USAID has a separate compound in the Green Zone, and its programs, for all practical purposes, are independent of the broader US government effort.

One telling example of this isolation is the staffing of PRTs. These are the coalition's front line "development" instruments, yet few of the PRTs we visited even had a USAID person among their staff.

USAID has contractors, including North Carolina's Research Triangle Institute and Northern Virginia's International Relief and Development, working in the provinces. Authorities in Baghdad managed these contractors.

Nongovernment organizations told us that they often viewed the PRTs with suspicion, and sometimes fear, believing that association with PRTs and their partly uniformed military staff would scare off local counterparts. What this meant is that USAID-financed activities in the provinces can be and often were unknown to PRTs and therefore frequently uncoordinated with PRT programs, which makes no sense.

I don't know why USAID is this way, but I can guess. It may have something to do with the systematic dismantling of that agency over the past 30 years. USAID's staffing collapsed from a high of around 18,000 in the 1970s to less than 2000 in 2008. These 2000 or so hardy souls manage about the same amount of appropriations as did the 18,000, which probably goes a long way in explaining why they no longer have the capacity to act as a development agency and have become a huge contracting agency. That, and a paralyzing web of congressional earmarks and mandates, made sure the agency has no room to maneuver, no ability to adapt, which is, of course, the opposite of what you need as a development agency in a country like Iraq.

Where 2 of the 3 Ds do work better is in the field, at the provincial level. In many of the PRTs we visited, we found a real sense of partnership between the military and civilian elements of these teams.

This field-based partnership may have been a "misery loves company" phenomenon, but I am pretty sure there is more to it than that. One of the bases for cooperation was a clear command structure on the military side, a lack of competing agendas on the US government civilian side,

a shared sense of mission and urgency, and an understanding that they were all in this together. As I have said, though, USAID was, for the most part, missing in this downstream action.

On the military side, as word came down from General Petraeus that the time had come to scale down direct intervention and work more closely with Iraqi counterparts, his troops reacted with enthusiasm.

The military staff assigned to PRTs told us many times, “we need to pull back and to help the Iraqis step up.” On the US government civilian side, the realities of being in the field doing development, Iraq style, appeared to be a marvelous antidote to silos and bureaucratic turf battles.

The shift from action to support was not easy for the military. Since the end of open hostilities, the coalition military in Iraq has been deeply into the business of reconstruction. The financing for this work came through the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP), initially designed to give commanders the wherewithal to fix what they broke in their efforts to defeat insurgents.

But as some semblance of normality began to return to parts of Iraq, commanders found themselves with a dangerous mix: continuing large CERP funds (\$2 billion in 2007), and energetic, can-do engineers. CERP morphed from post-conflict reconstruction to development financing. The results were mixed. CERP supported some excellent development investments, but some real clunkers, as well (the \$280 million water purification plant discussed above is a case in point).

To its credit, the military recognized this problem and began to rein in the use of CERP funds and to work more closely with PRTs to ensure that CERP-funded projects contributed to the larger PRT agenda.

The conundrum Petraeus and his commanders faced may seem unique to Iraq and the military, but it is not. The pressure to move the money, to create development on the ground that drove CERP commanders is different only in degree to the pressure that the managers and staff of development agencies feel in post-conflict and fragile states.

I mentioned I was recently in Timor-Leste, another post-conflict test case (de Tray 2008). There it was Australians who were throwing money and people at problems, but the result is the same: an overwhelmed government that struggled to manage its donors let alone deliver for its people.

## THE BIG TAKEAWAYS FROM IRAQ

Earlier I talked about General Petraeus's frustration with the development community. So, what is the answer to the General's question? What can be done *now* to create the breathing space needed to let post-conflict countries get on their feet and begin the long process of state-building? It's all about balance.

The people of Afghanistan, Timor-Leste, Liberia, and many other post-conflict and fragile states need to see their governments producing something tangible that makes life better. As I told the prime minister of East Timor in 2008, his government needs to deliver the following: people need to be able to walk out of their homes, travel safely to jobs, and see progress in their community. They need to have housing, safety, jobs, improving communities. But their governments are barely functioning. So, leaving it up to weak and incapacitated governments won't work. Bypassing the government may get services flowing (and, then again, it may not), but it does nothing to build the critical bond between people and government.

What we need are intermediate approaches where donors help governments deliver but without taking over. An intermediate approach is not the natural business model for most development agencies.

It is a hybrid model that joins government delivery with a new kind of donor support and grassroots oversight. Why these elements? Let's look first at the role of government. No donors and few nongovernment organizations work across all of a nation. Governments do, most especially regional and local governments. If you want to cover all of a country, local government is about your only choice. In any case, when it comes to state-building, for most citizens, local authorities are the face of government. Capitals are distant, out of touch, untrusted. Local officials are in the house next door.

Local governments can also be out of touch, but they are at least not physically distant. That is why it was right that Iraq and Afghanistan focused on delivery at the province and district level. It is local governments that deliver basic services, and local governments that generate employment opportunities.

Of course, for some things—moving the money, large infrastructure, security needs—the central government is essential. But the real action, the action that tells people things are getting better, happens in the provinces and districts.

Of course, local governments in post-conflict and fragile states are themselves weak. However, my experience in Afghanistan led me to believe that there is considerably more capacity in local governments than we give them credit for.

In any case, official donor interventions must be tailored to provide essential process support rather than implementation. A PRT model, suitably modified, is a starting point. Get people out into the provinces tasked with supporting local government, recognizing that these people cannot be your usual, run-of-the-mill Western consultants.

Most will have to have local language skills. Most will need to understand the special constraints and challenges of local government delivery in weak and fragile states. They may often be from nearby states rather than rich western countries because the institutions and constraints these neighboring countries face are far more relevant than US or European experiences.

So, we now have a delivery vehicle (local governments) and a support mechanism (PRTs with the right people in them). But what about accountability? Local governments are often corrupt. Dealing with corruption is where grassroots intervention comes in.

If money is to be moved from the center to local governments without having it siphoned off through corruption, about the only counterweight to bad governance in the short term is transparency and citizen engagement. Forget Corruption Commissions, Asset Declarations, and governance and anti-corruption strategies. Give people the information they need to understand what their government is doing.

People need to know how much money is coming to their districts, towns, and communities. They need to know who is responsible for managing those funds. They need to know what happened to the money—what in the end the results were. This level of transparency does not guarantee zero corruption, but it is an essential starting point to limiting corruption.

No donor should work in any fragile state without an agreement on transparency that covers process, inputs, and outcomes. Delivering on transparency is a constructive role for the international community.

I don't know if we will have another Iraq or another Afghanistan, but I am sure we will have something close.<sup>9</sup> How can the international community do better the next time it is asked to bring stability and development to a post-conflict country?

It can start by discarding old, failed models of intervention. It can agree to work with progressive governments of the kind found in Liberia and Timor-Leste to explore new ways of supporting state-building. Many of the ideas outlined in this chapter will need more development, but that development needs to happen with representatives of the countries at the table.

Post-conflict and fragile states are far too important to the world to let this situation continue.

## NOTES

1. This chapter is a revised version of the paper I wrote at the conclusion of my assignment in Iraq.
2. There was a retired USAID colleague who certainly knew development but was taken up with institutional issues around how to bring USAID into the coalition fold.
3. For a more extensive discussion of the mistakes the international development community makes see de Tray (2008).
4. US funding for Iraq reconstruction totaling \$45 billion is almost 90% obligated (\$40 billion) and about 70% disbursed (\$31 billion) as of April 2008. *Securing, Stabilizing, and Rebuilding Iraq. Progress Report: Some Gains Made, Updated Strategy Needed*. United States Government Accountability Office, June 2008.
5. For example, in its 30 April 2008 quarterly report, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction detailed that of approximately \$18.33 billion that had been apportioned, 73% went to the Department of Defense, 16% to USAID, 7% to the Department of State, and the rest to Treasury, the United States Institute of Peace, and other programs. The January quarterly report had similar percentages: 73% DoD, 16% USAID, 7% Department of State. Quarterly reports for 2007 detail the same percentages.
6. A good description of COIN and what is it intended to do is in [http://www.armytimes.com/community/opinion/army\\_opinion\\_dowling\\_070709/](http://www.armytimes.com/community/opinion/army_opinion_dowling_070709/).
7. For more on 3161s in Iraq, see Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (2006).
8. *The Glossary of Terms for Conflict Management and Peacebuilding* defines “whole of government” as: An approach that integrates the collaborative efforts of the departments and agencies of a government to achieve unity of effort toward a shared goal. Also known as interagency approach. The terms unity of effort and unity of purpose are sometimes used to describe cooperation among all actors, government and otherwise.
9. This was written before the rise of ISIS.





## CHAPTER 3

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# On to Afghanistan

**Abstract** De Tray served briefly on a team created by David Petraeus to review strategy in the Central Command area, which spread from Egypt to Afghanistan and Pakistan. That led to an invitation to participate as a development expert when the 173rd Airborne Division undertook a yearlong deployment to Afghanistan. De Tray describes his training to work alongside the military, learning the jargon, getting used to living on a forward operating base, and adjusting to new styles of communications, briefings, and transport. The author's first work with the 173rd, in November 2009–December 2009, included meetings with US, Afghan, and international development officials in Kabul and a meeting of a provincial development committee in Puli Alam. During 2010, de Tray took four more trips to Afghanistan to work with the 173rd as the People's Development Fund program was developed and piloted. On these trips, he met with international development, coalition, and Afghan officials, including some who were implementing the People's Development Fund. Experiences illustrate the imbalance on the ground between the military's heavily armed appearance and local settings and the contrast between the resources local military leaders controlled and those local officials had available.

**Keywords** Afghanistan · Forward operating base · International development institutions · Deployment · Counterinsurgency Nonkinetic · Provincial government

Some people join the army straight out of high school, others after college, a few later in life, but not many at 65. I did not in fact join the army at 65, but, as of 12 September 2009, I was a shoulder patch-wearing member of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, commanded by Colonel James Johnson (Fig. 3.1). My 173rd patches were due to Jay's thoughtfulness, an action representative of the welcome I received from the 173rd.

### THE CENTCOM ASSESSMENT TEAM

In 2008, the army promoted David Petraeus to commander of Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM covers many of the globe's hot spots (Map 3.1). Its area of responsibility (AOR) includes countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, most notably Afghanistan and Iraq. CENTCOM has been the main American presence in many military operations, including the Persian Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm, 1991), the War in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring



Fig. 3.1 The shoulder patches



**Map 3.1** CENTCOM area of responsibility (*Source* US Central Command)

Freedom, 2001–14), and the Iraq War (Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003–11). Since 2015, CENTCOM forces have been deployed primarily in supporting and advise and assist roles in Afghanistan (Operation Resolute Support, 2015–present) and Iraq (Operation Inherent Resolve, beginning in 2014).

One of Petraeus's first acts as CENTCOM Commander was to ask H.R. McMaster to organize an advisory group to review US strategy in the countries in his new command area.

Because of my work in Iraq, I was asked to join this advisory group, designated the CAT—CENTCOM Assessment Team. The CAT assigned me to two regional teams—the Central Asia team and the Afghanistan–Pakistan team. With me on the Afghanistan–Pakistan team was Major Jay Baker, 173rd Airborne Brigade's doctor. He had a strong interest in policy, and we hit it off immediately and worked closely together on the CAT. My fleeting three-week CAT friendship with Jay led to my yearlong work in Afghanistan that tested a local strategy for institution-building in counterinsurgency.

## WHAT SORT OF WAR IN AFGHANISTAN?

As Barack Obama's presidency began, his cabinet debated the kind of war the United States should pursue in Afghanistan (Woodward 2010). Some argued that Afghanistan was a counterterrorist war, in which the United States knew who the enemy were and should focus on killing them. Once we kill the enemy, the war would be over. Vice President Biden was the main proponent of pursuing a counterterrorism war in Afghanistan (and Pakistan).

Others argued that Afghanistan was a classic counterinsurgency war in which you cannot kill your way to victory. The more killing you do, the more insurgents you create. And distinguishing insurgents from ordinary people is often not possible. Vietnam taught us—or should have taught us—this in spades.

The strategy for counterinsurgency is Clear, Hold, Build, and Transfer, according to the manual written by Petraeus and James Amos (US Army and US Marine Corps 2007). In plain English, this means: get the enemy out, stabilize the area by starting programs to improve governance and deliver development, fix the things you broke in the Clear phase to show you are not the enemy, and hand off the programs developed in the Hold phase to nonmilitary actors. The manual also offers a medical taxonomy: stop the bleeding, give inpatient care for recovery, and give outpatient care for self-sufficiency. This taxonomy emphasizes the need for a government takeover of programs.

Counterinsurgency is not state-building—state or nation building is mentioned only in passing in the Petraeus—Amos manual. The core idea of counterinsurgency's nonfighting agenda is that countries stabilize when citizens have reason to believe in and support the government, or at least to support it more than they support the enemy.

Although introducing democracy to nondemocratic places is often suggested to link people to their government, the record on delivering democracy is not encouraging. Democracy is not just elections. It is an institution and an instrument for creating a bond between citizens and their government, making the government accountable to its citizens, and so legitimizing the government. Those in the development business know that building effective institutions takes a long time and is difficult because it must accommodate the country's culture.

So, what can we do in the meantime to stabilize a country struggling to extract itself from conflict and mismanagement? How can we create the desired outcomes of democracy in the absence of democracy?

One way is to make subnational governments work. And for most Afghans, local government is the face of government. If local government delivers even modest development programs, people will see that it can do something for them and are more likely to support the government than the insurgents. Connectivity between people and local government is in my reading at the heart of the counterinsurgency agenda.

Over the year that I worked in Afghanistan, we developed a program that did this. It was a radical, risky program that focused on shifting accountability from coalition forces, military and civilian, to Afghan local government. It was a learning, transparency-based program that sought Afghan solutions to Afghan problems rather than trying to impose western solutions on a highly non-western environment. When I left Afghanistan, it was too early to declare victory, but early returns were encouraging.

### THE 173RD AIRBORNE BRIGADE GOING TO AFGHANISTAN

Shortly after our CAT (CENTCOM Assessment Team) time, the army scheduled Jay Baker's brigade, the 173rd Airborne, for a yearlong tour in Afghanistan. Jay decided that someone with my development background might be helpful in the brigade's counterinsurgency work. Either foolhardy or a quick and great judge of character, he convinced the brigade commander, Colonel Jim Johnson, that I was worth checking out.

Colonel Johnson took the considerable risk of bringing me on board and then supporting my work. This says volumes about at least parts of today's army, led by bold and curious people (my later experience suggested that not all of today's army meets this standard).

For me, the appeal was moving from the abstract to the concrete by building on the work the GAT had started in Iraq. As a World Bank country director, I had been bothered when theoretically correct advice was practically unusable because it did not reflect the reality on the ground. The 173rd was kind enough to give me that opportunity to make policy, design approaches, and give advice where the action was.

## SIGNING UP

Jay Baker and I had exchanged a couple of emails in August 2009 in which he had asked me if I would help the 173rd prepare for Afghanistan and maybe help them while they were there. I had said yes in principle, having no idea what I had agreed to. On the Monday of Labor Day weekend, I was sitting at home with my family when I received a call from Jay asking if I would be interested in joining the 173rd during their predeployment training in Germany. I said I would love to.

Jay said, Great, could I be in Germany the following day? I said I could not manage that, but on Tuesday evening, I was on my way from Dulles International to Munich. As a civilian who had never served in the military, I had no idea what to expect, and could not possibly have anticipated what lay ahead.

## TRAINING AT HOHENFELS, GERMANY

You can't join the Army without training, even as an older man. My first interaction with the 173rd was during the final days of its training program at Hohenfels, Germany, preparing for deployment to Afghanistan.

My first encounter was a briefing—in fact, my first day in Hohenfels was a blur of briefings. In time, I came to realize this was wholly appropriate. Briefings of various kinds dominate army life, at least at the command level.

The army's briefing language is not English. The preponderance of acronyms shows its full weight in just a day of briefings. Let's start with naming conventions. At the command level, there are no names, only positions. Colonel Johnson is not Colonel Johnson, not Jim, not the Colonel. He is B6.

Jay told me that this naming convention was handed down from the days of Napoleon, considered, at least by Jay, the greatest general of all times. Napoleon's lieutenants decided his staff needed to be organized the same way as his brain—into four tactical units: combat, intelligence, logistics, and command support.

These are the first four in the B series. B5 is the deputy commander, leaving the commander at B6. The system also identifies B6's staff as S1 through S9, where S1 is brigade support; S2, intelligence; S3, operations; S4, logistics; S5, plans; S6, computers/automation; S7,

information operations; S8, finance; and S9, civil affairs (this would be my principal counterpart). I had to get this down quickly to have any ideas what people around me were discussing, for example: “B6 told B5 to shape up the S7 shop.”

Army briefings always use visual aids. PowerPoint slides take forms unheard of in the civilian world.

Only the military could do, or would need to do, what happens in predeployment training. Since a mistake on the job can be deadly, lives depend on getting training right. The entire Hohenfels base, all 40,000 acres (small by military standards) is devoted to training. Germans used to train their tank commands there.

Its size allows realism. For the 173rd, the training staff (some 80 of them) created a mini-Afghanistan, complete with forward operating bases, Blackhawk helicopters, MRAPs (miner-resistant ambush-protected vehicles), Afghan governors, interpreters, Taliban, and even mortar attacks and wounded.

The training packs what might be months of activities in the field (“downrange” in Army talk) into a couple of weeks. Briefings are especially prominent as the brigade puts its battle plan together, learns to operate in a new environment, and deals with unexpected contingencies. There are lots of reviews and revisions.

One had to see this exercise to believe it. Once it starts, everyone is “inside the box” which means, essentially, in Afghanistan. All involved are deadly serious. The idea is to learn by doing in an environment as close to reality as the trainers can make it, but not life-threatening. No one sleeps, as far as I can tell (I was the exception).

By the time I arrived nerves were beginning to fray as the exercise entered its last few critical days. During my first briefing, several battle commanders were to report in from the field (their bases were at some distance from the command center). Communications broke down several times. Colonel Johnson was not happy. At the BUA (battle update assessment) wrap up that night, he chewed out the communications guy unmercifully: “This better not happen downrange!”

Jim Johnson is not someone you would immediately identify as a brigade commander. He is tall, thin, bony, and bald in the H.R. McMaster-shaved-head style. I would guess he is in his mid-40s. He is a WestPoint graduate and the son of a lieutenant general. He had recently been promoted from battalion to brigade commander and was still settling into his new role when I met him.



Johnson is a man of few words and even fewer facial expressions, so he can be hard to read. Anything but a backslapper. On first meeting, he can seem quiet to the point of timidity. As you get to know him, you realize there is a reason why the army gave him one of its most important jobs. Afghanistan was then a mess, with counterinsurgency not succeeding and the Taliban making serious inroads. The International Security Assistance Force's new commander (the first had already been fired) was General Stanley McChrystal, one of the army's best and brightest. He was said to have done wonders in Iraq, although no one knew quite what, as the unit he commanded was very hush-hush. I am sure that Jim Johnson was where he was because McChrystal wanted him there and that McChrystal had his pick.

On day two, I began to get a sense of the scale of the training. Johnson—sorry, B6—asked me to join him on a tour of the Wardak forward operating bases. Wardak is one of two Afghan provinces that the 173rd would be responsible for, the other being Lowgar. Both are strategically important. They border Kabul, and critical supply routes pass through them.

Since there was in principle a war going on, we had to put on battle gear—flak jackets and helmet—and were taken there by Blackhawk helicopter (“helo”), complete with gunners hanging out the sides scanning the ground for the enemy (a flashback to my Iraq ventures). The laser tag vests everyone wears epitomize the realism of the exercise. These vests have sensors that record any “hit” you take from snipers, rockets, whatever. Once activated, they emit a loud shriek announcing to one and all that you are wounded or dead. Fortunately, mine did not go off.

Being chauffeured around in a Blackhawk is a rush. Jim had me sit next to him, which was, I thought, a good sign. We had a great day. I met a lot of people whom I struggled to keep straight. Everyone was remarkably welcoming, given that I had just dropped in on them.

This treatment introduced me to one of the 173rd's most amazing traits: openness to new ideas and willingness to learn, even though most of the people I met had no clue who I was beyond being yet another civilian expert brought into tell them their job.

The 173rd Brigade's willingness to learn suggested a sea change in at least some parts of the army since Vietnam. John Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (2002) contrasts the British army's approach to fighting Chinese insurgents in Malaysia with the US army's approach in Vietnam.



According to Nagl, the British success in Malaysia was in part due to the ability and willingness of the British Army to learn and adapt; the unwillingness of the US army to do so in Vietnam was part of the reason for its failure.<sup>1</sup>

As with most organizations culture starts at the top—once Jim Johnson made it clear he was listening to me, the rest of the brigade fell in step. This experience later influenced my decision not to work with the 4/10th, which replaced the 173rd in Afghanistan, when its commander made it clear that he was not going to listen to me.

In one session that day, I was asked to tell a largish group of young soldiers what I was planning. At the end of my presentation, one young man raised his hand and said, in essence, You are telling me that I am supposed to manage development projects? I have no idea how to do that. I am willing to try, but it is not my specialty. His question underscored a major weakness in the implementation of the US counterinsurgency plan. It tends to turn the military into a development agency, which makes no sense.

I said that I would make sure he got the support he needed and would find civilian agencies to take over as quickly as possible. Only much later did I realize how hollow this statement must have rung to the more experienced brigade members.

### CASERMA EDERLE

In late October, Jim Johnson invited me to visit the brigade's home base in Vicenza, Italy, as the 173rd completed its final preparations for Afghanistan. Caserma Ederle is the name of the base. There were lots of young, Midwestern-looking kids with babies and kids of their own everywhere. I guess that before you go off to war, you quite sensibly procreate.

The not-quite-so-young man who picked me up and would look after me, Bo Stuart, was, like almost everyone, exceptionally nice and smart. He headed the S-9 unit, responsible for civ-mil (civilian-military) connections and operations, and hence had responsibility for me. He had been in the army 17 years and had 2 kids, a 12-year-old boy and an 11-year-old girl. He came in fifth in the all-army martial arts competition. He comes from Native American stock but looks Italian and is one very tough soldier.

## HEADING DOWNRANGE

In November, Johnson asked me to join him on his voyage to Afghanistan as the new commander of US troops in Lowgar and Wardak provinces—a vote of confidence and an indication of serious interest in my contribution. We met in Istanbul, traveled to the Manas Air Base in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, and then took a military air flight to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan.

I read Rufus Phillips's *Why Vietnam Matters* (2008) as I traveled. His subtitle, *An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned*, reflected the Vietnam USAID program that was the precursor to Iraq's and Afghan's provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs). My experience would show that the subtitle of *my* book should be *An Eye-Witness Account of Lessons Still Not Learned*.

I read Phillips's book with a scary sense of déjà vu. In countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, we may be subtler with our mistakes, but they are fundamentally the same ones we made in Vietnam. Heading the list is a lack of cohesion, coherence, and continuity in managing the counterinsurgency. Stovepiped US agencies compete with each other in the diplomacy and development parts of the effort. They are not serious about coordinating with the US military. And they are unwilling to give national governments much role, if any.

We have not put nearly enough effort into grassroots governance. And as brigades move in and out and civilians come and go, we create the ten-one-year war problem: fighting a one-year war ten times. These were some of the main conclusions in the Iraq governance and development review; Afghanistan more than confirmed them.

The crime is, there is a better way, but we don't know how to make it happen. We know what we want to do: get US troops out of Wardak and Lowgar without exacerbating unrest. The army knows how: support community engagement that links people to their government. But the US government cannot control how western cultural imperialism and arrogance undermine such efforts any more than I had found the international aid community could. George Santayana's words "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it" should be engraved at the entrance to all three branches of government.

I suspected that our main challenge on this first trip would be to get people's attention. Ten years into the war, everyone already had a job

they thought they were mostly doing correctly. It would be a challenge to see if I could change this mindset by dint of will and logic. I had no other leverage.

*Bagram, 1 December 2009*

Bagram is the largest US military base in Afghanistan. Our flight to Bagram was on a C17, very large (it can carry something like 170,000 pounds) and, in our case, empty (Fig. 3.2). Gray hair got me a seat in the cockpit (Fig. 3.3). Two kids were flying this huge transport—the senior pilot was all of 27 (my sons were at the time 30 and 36). Think of a Boeing 747, only fatter and with a 27-year-old in charge.

The pilot warned me that they tended to approach airports differently than commercial planes. Commercial plane glide paths start 100 kilometers from the airport and approach it on autopilot at about a 3-degree decline.



Fig. 3.2 The C17

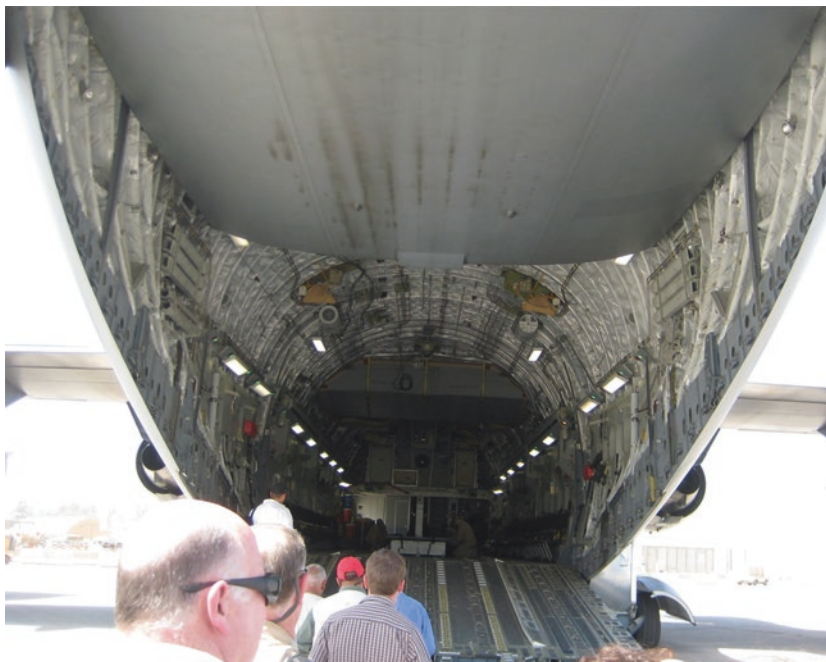


Fig. 3.2 (continued)

But the air force pilots, not the autopilot or the tower, were flying the plane. And they stayed high until close to Bagram and then took a steep shot onto the runway to avoid tempting insurgents into taking a shot at them as they landed. The pilot and his even younger copilot, who was in charge of the landing, did a great job.

We arrived in Bagram at about 18:00 Afghanistan time. Our Bagram accommodations were my first introduction to “real” army life. Jim Johnson, the brigade’s master sergeant, another person I had not seen before, and I were in a small hooch (army talk for living quarters) divided into four “bedrooms” by plywood a little over 6 feet high. A weak excuse for privacy but better than none—and better than what was to come.

The hooch had a set of neon lights that run the length of the room. All the windows were boarded up, so, it is either pitch dark or blazingly bright in the room. Since I tended to go to bed earlier than my room-mates, I had to rely on airline blinders to get to sleep.



Fig. 3.3 The author in the C17 cockpit

### *Bagram, 2 December*

I had no sense of the rhythm of work and life at Bagram. We got up late the first day. I was awake for a long time but heard nothing, so didn't move. When I eventually went off to shower and returned, Jim Johnson was about ready to leave for breakfast. Me, I had no idea where the food was. Jim kindly waited while I rushed through getting dressed.

This experience produced the first of many overwhelming attacks of helplessness I was to have in Afghanistan. Without my handlers, there was not much I could do—even feed myself. I never got used to the feeling. Military bases are a maze of identical, confusing, and signless buildings. Everyone seemed to know where they were going but me.

I constantly felt that if I lost sight of Jim, my family would never see me again. I didn't even know what to ask to be directed to—although I learned the way from our hooch to the DFAC (mess hall), so at least I wouldn't starve.

I spent most of the time working on appointments. Not so nice being my own secretary. Although no one else could do it, my work was incredibly inefficient, since I couldn't get on email. I was not allowed access to the military system for security reasons, and there was, so far as I could tell, no wireless network. I turned my Blackberry data system back on. I was sure I would be eaten alive by roaming charges but didn't have much choice. At least my cell phone worked here.

The afternoon was taken up with briefings. One was by General Curtis Scaparrotti, the commander of Regional Command (RC) East, of which Lowgar and Wardak are a part. General McChrystal was supposed to come but had been socked in by Kabul weather. Scaparrotti's briefing seemed to be Force Protection 101. I had to wonder about how my very senior group of colleagues were taking his remarks. Of course, no one openly complained, but Jim Johnson later commented that there was nothing new.

Before Scaparrotti's briefing, Dawn Liberi, with whom I had worked in the CENTCOM review, gave an enthusiastic briefing on the nonkinetic (nonfighting) counterinsurgency work and the New Beginnings program the United States and coalition were then pursuing. Her emphasis on the need for a new beginning was consistent with one of my views, if focused on different instruments. Dawn was the senior civilian representative for RC-East, Scaparrotti's civilian counterpart. On paper, the military command structure and the civilian side were strictly parallel, but in practice military commanders had authority, and most civilian leaders did not.

The next briefing was an address by McChrystal by videoconference. (We moved to secure video conferencing facilities—there were six in the general's headquarters—to hear it.) The briefing was pretty much as one might have scripted it, with spirit-raising emphasis on four Cs: clarity, capacity, commitment, and confidence. In hindsight I would like to have seen a different set: cohesion, coordination, and continuity.

The audience for the McChrystal briefing was interesting. Because Dawn had escorted me, I ended up in Scaparrotti's briefing room. With Dawn, Scaparrotti, a few senior US officers, and me were a few senior Afghan officials from the RC-East area of operation, with interpreters standing behind them, another reminder of daily communications barriers.

### *Bagram, 3 December*

I slept better the second night than the first, but as I was getting ready for bed around 22:00, I heard a couple of telltale booms that took me

back to Iraq's Green Zone. Johnson told me later that the enemy occasionally lobbs mortars into Bagram as reminders that they are out there. The sounds were some distance away (Jim said, "I heard the whoosh overhead so knew we were OK"). But the soldiers around me headed to nearby bunkers. I stayed in my "room," wandering out to brush my teeth just as the soldiers were heading back to their hooches. My behavior reflected neither foolhardiness nor bravery—I just did not realize until then that there *were* bunkers around us.

The poor captain, Rob Wilson, who was trying to organize the transport for us to Kabul, was going nuts. He needed at least 24 hours to organize our movement, but I couldn't give it to him because I didn't have answers to my meeting requests. The problem reflected a clash of cultures that underlies the difficulty of civilians and the military working together.

Partly the problem was that Jim Johnson didn't "own" any transportation assets in Afghanistan yet. The 310th brigade currently occupying the Lowgar and Wardak battlespace controlled them. Though the 173rd would eventually take over, the 310th was not being as cooperative as it might in sharing transport. Its uncooperativeness turned out to be good if expensive.

I heard the sergeant major tell Johnson about an incident in Lowgar. A tower collapsed, badly injuring several soldiers. Then the rescue crew on the way there hit an improvised explosive device, with more injuries. No one had died yet, but at least one was not expected to make it. Lowgar was the quieter of the two provinces, so this was not a good sign.

During my first trip to Afghanistan, I could see that some of the skeptics in Johnson's senior command team were coming around to me. No one had been outright hostile, but some had been more enthusiastic about my presence than others. The sergeant major and Johnson's logistics person, the two about whom I worried most, were treating me with more warmth and comfort. My accompanying Jim Johnson everywhere helped (I was in every one of his meetings except those where my lowly "secret" security clearance kept me out). So did, I suspect, my showing up in Kabul, going to the forward operating base, and apparently being serious about doing my bit, 65-year-old ex-World Banker or not.

When Johnson and I met General Scaparrotti, he gave Jim a white binder full of his "Commander Intent," guidelines, and so on. The tone was very "This is the way it will be"—nice but firm. We are in the army after all. (But I was to learn that few brigade commanders pay much attention to the regional commander's intent, leading to the ten-one-year wars problem.)



*Bagram, 4 December*

In the morning, we were more in my lane, as the military puts it, doing development stuff. Johnson mentioned the rule of law several times in our meeting—how to create some semblance of a justice system in local communities. When we got back to the office, I emailed a couple of people at the US Institute of Peace. In less than an hour, I had a terrific response and could tell Jim Johnson, “It’s under control.” Which of course it wasn’t, but it was nice to be able to show that I could be useful simply because I knew where to look and whom to call or email.

There are times when I understood so little that I worried about being effective. But when we met what passed for governance and development experts, I knew I could be helpful. Life would be better when Bo Stuart arrived. He would be able to follow up for me when I left in ways Jim Johnson would not.

We headed to Forward Operating Base Darulaman, on the edge of Kabul, to prepare for a day with the National Solidarity Program (NSP) developed by the World Bank. Getting transport was an utter nightmare. You would think that the military, with its apparently infinite supply of vehicles, could manage it, but, since Jim Johnson had not taken over his battlespace, he had nothing he could use. I adamantly opposed a convoy of MRAPs taking us to our government meetings. In the end, the 173rd rented a couple of armored SUVs for roughly four days for \$23,000. Our military is so good in some ways, and so bad in others.

Similarly, I had asked Dawn Liberi about providing PRTs with lower profile security, which meant armored SUVs rather than Humvees or MRAPs (as we suggested in Iraq). Dawn said that the option had been discussed but cost too much: \$8 million per PRT. How can that be, I thought? Armored SUVs can’t cost more than \$150–200,000. Say each PRT needed four. That’s \$800k plus maintenance; less than the cost of one MRAP which runs between a half-million and a million dollars each; even Humvees are \$200,000+ each. But apparently, you can’t just buy the vehicles, you have to create a whole new line of effort, including training and special maintenance facilities. So, a \$1 million cost grows to \$8 million. No wonder the military has \$800 hammers.

I could not, however, complain about the treatment I was getting. When I told Jim Johnson in the morning I was worried about not having sufficient cold-weather clothing for Forward Operating Base Shank, in the afternoon a full set of army issue cold gear appeared on my bed—a



good sleeping bag, an outer jacket, rain jacket, long johns, and undershirts. I was not only warm but was starting to look the part.

As I listened to Jim Johnson run his brigade, I realized how different military management was from civilian management. Jim was a quiet guy, but boy could he chew people out. The details of running a nearly 4000-person company with personnel, logistics, strategy, tactics, moods, and minds were endless. As much as I liked him as a friend and colleague, I don't think I would like to work for him, out of fear of getting on his bad side. I thought his staff had a great deal of respect for him, but, bar a few who are close to him, found him confusing and hard to read.

### *Darulaman, 5 December*

Forward Operating Base Darulaman was a logistics and training base. It was depressing, relatively small, with little to do, and out of town—and no one would be allowed to go into town. I could not spend a few months there, there let alone a year.

It does have a great view (Fig. 3.4). Just as you drive off the base, there is an old castle last used as officers' quarters by the Russians. It is a reminder of past and crumbled empires and shows that we are not the first country in modern times to unsuccessfully take on Afghanistan.

It was our day to move into my area of expertise. We were to attend a full-day meeting with Minister Ehsan Zia of the Ministry of Reconstruction and Rural Development (MRRD). Our arrival caused a stir, with three armored SUVs; seven people in full battle gear (flak jackets, helmets, goggles, and long guns [rifles]), five of them spreading out and looking for the enemy; and me in my Armani blue blazer. The ministry officials looked as though we had invaded them. Our interpreter later told me that he'd overheard a conversation saying just that—not seriously but not happily.

So, there we stood, with me in my blazer surrounded by eight heavily armed US soldiers. Then in drove Qazi Isa, the World Bank's country manager for Afghanistan. The door of his vehicle cracked open, and he stuck out his head and said, "Is that you, Dennis?"

The day went well. People were curious about our presence, but in the end, they seemed to appreciate the outreach. We met in the afternoon with Minister Zia, and, at least in my eyes, that meeting went well. Zia and I hit it off, and he invited me to lunch the next time I was in



**Fig. 3.4** Outside forward operating base Darulaman

Kabul. We also met with the NSP team, a potential link between military governance/development and the government/civilian side.

Jim Johnson later said it was all great, but it could be hard to read my military colleagues. As time showed, Bo Stuart was not impressed.

### *Kabul, 6 December*

We had two great days in Kabul. An air force airman working as an advisor in MRRD said that we were the first people who had ever taken the time to try what we were trying. That is in itself a pretty serious indictment of the coalition's efforts in Afghanistan. So is the fact that the liaison and advisor to the ministry was a career air force guy—right principle, wrong execution.

As I sat at the meeting on NSP with Johnson on one side and Stuart on the other, both in fatigues, I was obviously pursuing a very different development project than those of my World Bank days. The pile of body armor on the floor was a telltale sign.

On this trip, at least, I delivered. When Jim Johnson took up his command in Lowgar and Wardak, he would be way ahead of most people in his position on counterinsurgency. I was pretty sure that I had connected the 173rd to the government's development programs in ways that no one had done before.

We met with the World Bank and with an advisor to the minister of reconstruction and rural development. We had lunch at Ashraf Ghani's house (he became Afghanistan's president in 2014), and then headed to Forward Operating Base Shank.

The meetings went well, but Jim Johnson was losing patience. He later said to me that he was not good for more than an hour of sitting and listening. Then he had to get up and move around. Plus, development was not his territory. He disappeared from one of our MRRD meetings, and I later learned he had been out talking to the locals. He probably learned more than we did.

Kabul was then a dusty, run-down city built into a hill, with lots of decrepit buildings and mostly awful roads. There was much construction, and it used people, not machines, which was probably right for that economy. The traffic jams were terrible, with chaotic drivers and people weaving in and out everywhere. There were not many military vehicles, so I was glad we did not end up traveling to MRRD in Humvees or MRAPs.

The hills and the traffic were the same as in 1978, but otherwise Kabul was a far cry from the city I had visited when I was living in Islamabad, Pakistan. Then Kabul was almost a rest-and-recreation site for those of us stationed in Pakistan—we went there to buy things we couldn't get in Islamabad, such as tires for my too-large US station wagon. In 1978, I drove myself and my family there from Islamabad through Peshawar and Landikotal and the Khyber Pass; today that couldn't happen even in an MRAP.

My 2009 Afghanistan colleagues were surprised by and made envious of that earlier trip. In the not very distant past, Afghanistan was a decent, reasonably safe country; the opposite of its current state. The change is by no means entirely the fault of Afghans.

Ashraf Ghani's nephew, Siar Ahmad Faruq and General Mohammad Wasiree were informative. Ashraf was an old friend and colleague from my World Bank days. The general did not speak English, but we had brought an interpreter.

Ashraf Ghani's house is next door to MRRD, so we walked over. No one seemed to notice or care about me in civvies and a platoon of US military security people strolling down the street. At Ashraf's house, the

armed guard at the entrance asked Jim Johnson to leave his weapon at the gate, but Jim was having none of that and, in the end, was allowed to pass.

The pre-lunch entertainment was the general's discussion of Lowgar province with the aid of a large map he had made for us. The map showed the tribal groups, the hot spots, and the places where the general thought security barriers should be constructed. It was instructive for me, but I had a feeling Johnson and Stuart did not learn a lot. We then moved into the dining room for a tasty Afghan lunch: rice, mutton, potatoes, flatbread.

The flight to Forward Operating Base Shank was cold and dark, so I didn't see much. I sat in the back hoping that there was heat there, which turned out not to be true.

### *Shank, 6 December*

Shank is a working forward operating base in the middle of where the enemy operates. To avoid being an easy target for mortars or snipers at night, it is unlit, so getting around was frighteningly confusing. Even in daylight it was a maze.

The hundreds of hooches that house the brigade are identical and are not numbered consecutively, so knowing your hooch number was not much help in finding it. Jim Johnson had his own, which would be his home for a year. I had been assigned a hooch with several soldiers, but Sergeant Major Rick Howell, who was looking after me, couldn't find mine, so he ended up putting me in his hooch. It had eight cubicles with a bed and curtains. I also had what passed for a desk—a plywood slab nailed into one corner—but no chair. Rick Howell was great. He got me a brand-new pillowcase courtesy of his wife for my not-clean-looking pillow and helped me settle in.

Most important, he taught me the way to the toilets and showers. Remember, there was no light in the forward operating base at night. The trick was to turn left out of the hooch, walk until you saw the red glow of the Intel office (which never closes), turn right between two rows of hooches, and walk 100 meters.

You'd think getting back would be easy, but I never once did it at night without feeling lost. Once the moon and stars came out, the place lit up and going to the bathroom in the middle of the night became tolerable, sort of, but the first few hours after sundown were impenetrably dark.

Although we got to Shank at a reasonable time in the evening, bed was a long time coming. Bo Stuart had organized a briefing for 21:30 by the outgoing S9 (civilian affairs) person for Lowgar, a young captain named Lazlo Padko. It was a good briefing. Lazlo was very smart and well-informed on Lowgar.

He was, however, too confident in his views on development for someone whose entire development experience comprised ten months in Lowgar. We tussled over the NSP. Lazlo said it was a failure, and I told him he was full of it. I later realized that he may well have been more right than I was, though for different reasons than the ones he gave. But it was a good lesson in the need to listen and learn. We made up later. He was great material even if he needed refinement, and I offered to get him money to support writing up his experience and offered to coauthor (that did not happen).

That night I had been visiting Jim Johnson in his hooch and left to find my way back my quarters. Stepping into total darkness, I was immediately lost, with no idea where I was or where my quarters were. After a moment of complete panic—I didn't even know enough to ask directions and didn't see anyone to ask—I wandered around for a while, basically walking in a circle, and ended up back at Johnson's quarters. They looked just like everyone else's, but fortunately, he was standing on the porch and was distinctive enough to be recognizable. To cut a long story short, he helped me eventually find my hooch and my bed. I've never been so happy to see a bed in my life.

### *Shank, 7 December*

The stay at Shank was fascinating and exhausting. There are many people on the civilian side (contractors, a Czech PRT, a group of USAID people, and so on), and I wondered why Jim Johnson needed one more and how I was going to fit into this mass of civilian resources without being on the ground, which I was not willing to do. Johnson said that what he wanted from me was a reality check and I should not be in the weeds day to day. He also said that the contacts I had helped him make were invaluable, which raised my spirits.

This trip was too much like being a soldier. I had no gun and only half a uniform—the military garb I had been issued to keep me from freezing—but for all other purposes I was one of the guys. I felt like a klutz much of the time, but people were very kind. An incredible experience, one into which I am proud to have gotten myself.

The next day we went to Puli Alam, Lowgar's provincial capital, in a convoy of three mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs) to listen to the local provincial development committee debate education, and security and police projects (Figs. 3.5 and 3.6).

The contraption on the front is what sets off the improvised explosive devices before the MRAP gets there. Fortunately, I didn't get to see it at work (I was in the lead MRAP).

The men at the table were straight out of the mujahideen. The fact that everyone looks alike is one reason why fighting a counterinsurgency is so tricky—they could have been Taliban for all I knew, with long beards and great turbans.

Chaos ruled until the deputy governor showed up and brought order. Then, to my astonishment, these tribal types began to write on a flip chart their lists of projects for each Lowgar district. Participants put the lists on the wall, identifying about 100 priority projects.



**Fig. 3.5** Mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle with improvised explosive device sweeper



**Fig. 3.6** Ready for battle

Following the discussion was difficult even with two interpreters because there was just too much going on. The best the interpreters could do was occasionally summarize the debate.

That evening I attended a gathering of the governance and development people at Shank, military and civilian. I left depressed by the morass of programs, led by people who did not know much about undertaking development and even less about building local capacity.

And I met Johnson for a final outbound briefing. A combination of exhaustion and what seemed overwhelming odds left me once again questioning what I was doing there. But Jim said that he was pleased with the progress and assured me that my role was and would be critical.

### *Darulaman, 8 December*

The helo ride to Kabul was great. It was in daylight and followed the valleys, giving a bird's eye tour of the province. There were only three



of us, two contract workers (who looked to be Pakistani) and me, so we had plenty of room. I sat in the back corner, where Sergeant Major Howell said the view would be best. A little chilly; but indeed good viewing.

How did people live in the area we were flying over? I saw a few traditional houses. Some had animal enclosures, but I did not see a spot of green the entire trip, just endless brown hills and mountains. Lowgar was said to be once the breadbasket for Kabul, but not where I was flying.

And I saw not one smoke plume from any of the dwellings. It was well below freezing that morning, but there was no sign of houses generating heat. It reminded me of a winter 2001 trip through the Fergana Valley of Central Asia. We visited local houses that as far as I could tell were unheated, and they were certainly cold. People in this part of the world—Afghanistan and Central Asia—are really tough! It is no wonder they have been able to resist invaders for 1700 years.

When I left Shank, Howell warned me not to get off at the first stop, which was to be Baraki Barak, one of Lowgar's districts. As it turned out, we flew directly to Kabul. I knew I had arrived at Darulaman mainly because Rob Wilson, the head of my personal security team was waiting for me beside an ancient pickup truck. I'm not sure I would have known to get off there if I hadn't spotted him.

Once on the ground, I went to the base internet house to catch up on emails, my last link to the outside world. My Blackberry had not worked at Shank. I also called the US consulate in Kabul with a visa problem. Because I had come on MILAIR (military aircraft) to a military base, I had no entry stamp in my passport. The consulate confirmed that I had a problem. To leave Kabul, I would have to take a letter from my "employer" to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explaining why I had arrived on MILAIR. The ministry would give me a document to take to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which would inform the immigration people that I could leave. This process would take a day or two. But I was leaving the next morning. The consulate said that I might get lucky and do what I needed to that day, but if not, I would just have to delay my departure.

I had raised the passport issue when I met Siar, Ashraf Ghani's nephew, before I left for Shank. He said he could help and asked for a copy of my passport page, which I sent. But I had not heard from him and inferred that he had done nothing (which was, in fact, the case). At Darulaman, I called, emailed, and texted him but could not reach him.



So, I got the security team and two SUVs together and headed into Kabul to find the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. About 10 minutes into the ride, my phone rang. It was Siar. He said he was about to go to the airport and would try to fix my problem there. I should not go to the ministry. Though concerned about putting my fate in the hands of a near-stranger, I agreed.

A little later Siar called and said he needed my passport and papers. Because he was not cleared to get onto the base, we met outside its security perimeter. I passed everything over and crossed my fingers. Giving one's passport to anyone at any time is uncomfortable, let alone in a country like Afghanistan to someone I barely knew.

About an hour later, Siar called to ask when I had come into the country, which I took to be a good sign. And later he called again to say that he was on his way to the base entrance and would meet me in ten minutes. Rob Wilson and I went through the security gates, parked just inside the last one, and walked out to a field where Siar was waiting. He gave me my passport with an entry stamp in it, explaining that unbeknownst to me I had arrived in Kabul from Dubai on 24 November. If the immigration people took this ruse seriously, they would have to be able to say that I came from somewhere with connecting flights to Kabul, and my Dubai visa stamp from an earlier trip. Mary and I made did the trick.

The only flaw, which I noticed immediately though the immigration people had not, was that my Afghan visa didn't start until 25 November, so I would not have been allowed in on 24 November. All I could think of was that the inconsistency would be discovered at the airport, ending my return home. Fortunately, it turned out that the immigration people at the airport were not so vigilant.

But there is more to the passport handover. Siar travels with a security detail—four heavily armed guys in black military garb (I had not noticed this when I first met him). When he returned with the passport from the airport and parked with his convoy in an open field, his security detail jumped out and did their duty. The sight of Siar's security detail threw the base guards, a mixed bag of coalition troops (not US) into a frenzy. The base guards grabbed weapons. Base security started to move toward Siar's security. I was right in the middle, initially oblivious to it all.

As Rob Wilson and I walked back, however, I saw the engagement and said to Rob that I did not want Siar hassled. He said the base guards were just nervous having armed people so near the base. About then, a

Pakistani coalition commander came running up yelling, “Very bad! Very bad! Taliban! Taliban!” meaning, I guess, that Siar and his gang could have been Taliban on the attack. I apologized profusely and said that all was OK, and things settled down.

*Darulaman, 9 December*

I got up at 04:45 to shower, pack, and get a quick coffee before we left at 05:45. The transport was outside the wire, so I shouldered my duffel (which now weighed close to 60 pounds), grabbed my backpack and body armor, and headed toward the SUVs. I could barely handle the lot. Rob asked if he could help (but didn’t insist the way others had). Since I wanted to make sure I could carry it all if I had to, I declined. I made it (score one for CrossFit!) but was about to keel over by the time I got to the vehicles.

The trip to the airport underscored that Kabul is a city under siege. I had my security detail, all six of them, in three armored SUVs. We left the base on time, so traffic was light. As we neared the airport, we arrived at the first of three checkpoints. The checkpoint went quickly—just a license plate filter—even though our rented SUVs have no license plates (the only vehicles I saw in Kabul without them). I’m not sure how the system worked, but our hired security people had access to most secure places.

The second checkpoint, a bit tighter, separated official embassy and UN vehicles from the rest. We were part of the rest.

The third checkpoint was serious. Agitated Afghans pulled doors open, stuck their heads in, and told me to get out for a body search. Out I got and searched I was. At the end, the old man searching me put his hand on his gun to asked, in effect, Where was my weapon? I said I didn’t have one. He must have thought I was with the CIA or Blackwater, the private American military company. The uniformed guys in my security detail didn’t have to get out. They had guns all over them. I assume the guards knew that they were not flying.

The closest vehicles get to Kabul’s international terminal is about 500 meters. At that point, I had to say goodbye to all my support. I wasn’t too worried, but I had a fleeting sense of panic as I walked alone toward the terminal. It was the first time since I entered Afghanistan I was not in military hands.

After three checks of my e-ticket, and one more extremely thorough body search, I was inside the terminal. The Safi Air counter for Frankfurt didn't open for another 45 minutes. At check-in, the agent was very pleasant but initially gave me a seat in coach. When I said that wasn't right, I'm in business class, he reacted dully and changed the seat—I don't think he ever looked at my e-ticket. Maybe there is a cheaper way to fly business class: bluff.

Next up was immigration. With some angst, I handed over my passport, but I sailed through.

### THE SECOND VISIT, MARCH 2010

I left Washington for my second visit to the 173rd on 20 March. I went to Dubai, and then on to Kabul, arriving 21 March.

I had decided to start a diary, which the following accounts use. Why? I had met Rory Stewart, author of *Prince of the Marshes* and *The Places in Between*, in the waiting lounge for the Safi Air flight from Dubai to Kabul. I recognized him from his pictures and introduced myself, saying that I am sure he did not know me from Adam. It took him a moment, but he then said, "You worked for the World Bank, right? You were the country director for where?—That's right, Indonesia. You had a great Indian country economist who wrote a wonderful piece on China. What was his name? Vikram Nehru, right?" I now knew how he does what he does. He has a photographic memory.

I told him a bit about what I was trying to do. He reacted, "Wow, that's going to be difficult. You must keep a diary. No one with your perspective has tried to do this before." He got me excited about trying to capture the adventure and represents an audience I want eventually to reach.

I read a lot on the way over. It convinced me that, as with health care reform in the United States, for reconstruction and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan we didn't lack technical solutions but lacked the incentives and political commitment to implement them.

No one in Kabul wanted any rocking of the Afghan boat. They had their orders from Washington, sort of, and didn't want anyone telling them that what they were doing was not going to get them where they need to go. Unfortunately, my job was intended to rock the boat.

The trick was to move in the right direction but stay under the radar screen and not be seen threatening anyone's turf. But there were so

many vested institutional interests: the military, the rest of the US government, and an army of contractors. How many windmills did I want to tilt against? How effective could I be spending two to three weeks in Afghanistan every couple of months, in contrast to being there full-time?

And the United States seemed singularly uninterested in bringing in the international community, including the multilateral development institutions, despite having no plan for the development and governance programs when the military leaves. The multilateral institutions (the World Bank, the Asia Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) are the most cost-effective way to do development.

I knew I was back in Afghanistan when my flight's luggage came out, except for mine and that of maybe six other passengers. The belt stopped. We waited. People ran around. I was sure we were doomed. But 45 minutes later the belt started again, and to my amazement and delight, my bag came out.

I knew I was back in the army when I saw our escort to Forward Operating Base Darulaman: four MRAPs (Fig. 3.7), quite a sight. As big as they are, the army did not design them for luggage—they devote most of their size to armor—so we were stuffed in with our bags all over our feet and laps. I learned later that the MRAPs were Plan B, brought in when armored SUVs the 173rd had rented failed to show up. I arrived at Forward Operating Base Darulaman to be greeted by my main 173rd counterparts: Jay Baker, Bo Stuart, and Jim Johnson.

We went downtown on the 22nd to see Susanne Holste at the World Bank, in my ongoing effort to link the military's counterinsurgency programs to civilian organizations with the expertise and capacity to take them over. This time, thank goodness, our SUVs showed up. I wore a flak jacket (Jim Johnson's orders) but left it in the car when we got to the Bank's offices.

At the Bank, there was a civ-mil clash involving Bo Stuart. Bo is hard to read. I have a strong sense he has very little respect for civilians generally and development people in particular—except me, I hoped. The guards at the Bank asked him if he was armed. He said, yes, he was. They asked him to leave his weapon in the guard room and he said, no, he could not do that. Then they asked him to leave it out in the car with the security team. To that he said, I would rather not, looking like he would, but at that point, the guards said, in effect, what the hell, and let us in guns and all.



Fig. 3.7 A mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle

The meeting went well. Afterward we met Shahm Mahmood Maikhel at the Kabul office of the US Institute for Peace. Shahm Mahmood had done just about everything in Afghanistan, from deputy minister to United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) advisor. We spoke at length, and I think that even Bo was impressed with his knowledge and forthrightness.

In the afternoon we went to the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development (MRRD) to see Patrick Donley, whom I had met in December 2009. The conversation led to new ideas for the 173rd to collaborate with MRRD.

We had dinner with Colonel John Agolia, director of the Counterinsurgency Training Center in Kabul. I had met him previously with some Washington friends. I continued to be impressed with the military but also worried. They were can-do guys and gals—hard studiers and quick learners. To hear them brief on the personalities in the area of operation was impressive, and just their ability to list off all the names floored me.

But in the final accounting, they were soldiers with a penchant for thinking they knew best. My colleagues seemed to know what was right even though they knew very little about what was not working.

When I finally got down to Shank on the 25th, I met with John Lister, the senior civilian for the 173rd. We had a good conversation about the political realities in Kabul. It helped me understand why the RC East higher-ups have not been all that helpful in getting me to Lowgar.

Following this conversation, I was on the phone with Ashraf Ghani's nephew Siar trying to get the coordinates for where the helos were to land in Northern Lowgar for the tribal get together the next day that Ashraf (Ghani) was hosting as part of his first, unsuccessful campaign for Afghanistan's presidency. The 173rd was helping to organize it. Siar said that his Google global imaging was down, he couldn't give the coordinates, and he would have to drive the hour and a half to Shank from Kabul to show us where the event would be.

I found Bo Stuart and told him. He told me he thought we already had the coordinates. Not according to Siar, I said, and Bo, who was in a meeting, answered, "You handle it." Me! The least qualified person on the base.

I called Chris Storms (officially: CW4 USA 173rd ABCT Targeting Officer), who I knew handled this sort of thing for Bo. Chris told me that Siar was right: we did not have the coordinates. I told Chris to call Siar and tell him to drive down. New day, new skills, I thought, from global development advisor to security/logistics officer.

There are many fantastic young people in the army. I had breakfast with one of them, Roxanne Bras, a first lieutenant who was getting ready to lead a patrol that morning. She is a Harvard graduate and had just been awarded a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford. I met her because she had learned that a "development expert/doctor type" had joined the brigade, and she wanted my advice on what she should study at Oxford. She had managed to get through Harvard with first the navy and then the army paying her way. Exceedingly smart and self-possessed, here she was leading army patrols in Afghanistan and loving it.

I breakfasted another morning with the brigade chaplain, Sean Wead; the brigade doctor, Jay Baker; and the brigade S9 (civ/mil), ex-special forces Bo Stuart. It was an interesting if depressing conversation. At one

extreme was Bo, who is special forces through and through. His view on Iraq was that there was no point in debating the weapons of mass destruction issues. Maybe they were there, and maybe they were not. But if we thought they were there, we should have gone in, kicked butt, either found the weapons of mass destruction or convinced ourselves that there were none, and gone home. If the Iraqis wanted a civil war, fine. Let them kill each other.

At the other extreme was the chaplain, not surprisingly. Sean thought that we were the problem. If we weren't here, there would be more stability, less violence, and less threat to the United States.

I heard shades of the chaplain's view from Shank's commander, Jim Johnson, as well. But he also believed that if we left either Iraq or Afghanistan, we would risk a rise of the enemy who would threaten US security through terrorism. Recent events—the rise of ISIS and the need to send US troops back to Afghanistan—suggest that Jim was closest to correct.

I had little idea but tended toward the chaplain's view. Our presence in Afghanistan was a huge irritant, and no matter what we thought, to the Afghans we were just another in a long line of invaders. But I recognized as unknowable what would happen if we left, or if we had not come at all. Anarchy? More Taliban rule? The resurgence of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda? A return to the reasonably stable Afghanistan I knew in 1978? It was anyone's guess.

Even in 2018, the Afghan story is unfolding. The most recent World Bank report (2016) showed a country that had done a reasonable job transitioning from war and occupation to postwar economic stability, and even grown some. The situation is still fragile, but appears to offer hope. The Afghan government's ownership of the transition was key to the turnaround.

But as of 2018, the United States decided to re-engage or, more accurately, raise its engagement in Afghanistan. Success would require humility and patience, since in the end only Afghans can fix their country. Because neither humility nor patience comes to mind in describing the current presidential administration, I am not optimistic.

I spent another day at Forward Operating Base Altimur, near Shank but quite a bit smaller. The commander there, Paul Fellingner, had set up a district governor meeting in his new "conference facility." I met some people I needed to know, including Engineer Mohammad Rahim, the district governor of Baraki Barak, one of the more progressive districts.

Rahim's implementation of the People's Development Fund, the program the 173rd and I developed, may have done more than any other experience in Afghanistan to convince me that the principles underlying it were correct and that district governors had a lot more ability to implement it than the coalition gave them credit for. The People's Development Fund will be described in Chapter 4.

The day was also frustrating because I had to listen to people trying to justify their projects. Although they declared how much they wanted to listen to the Afghan people, they, or the US Congress, had already decided what the Afghan people needed.

The helo rides to Altimur and back were good, though. Since no one here ever goes anywhere in a straight line, we saw a lot of the area of operation on a bright, chilly morning. This rugged part of Afghanistan had amazing rock formations, and snow was still on the mountain peaks.

The next day we went back to Forward Operating Base Airborne, to the north nearer Kabul, for a "Board of Directors" meeting to pull together the various elements of the soft side of counterinsurgency; or at least keep them from pulling apart. The day was fascinating and tiring. The meeting included the heads of the organizations doing development in Jim Johnson's AOR—the 173rd, the Czech PRT, the Turkish PRT, USAID, and the State Department. The Czech and Turkish PRTs did not get along, which boded poorly for coordination.

### THIRD VISIT, MAY–JUNE 2010

My third visit to Afghanistan and the 173rd began with my arrival in Kabul on 13 May 2010 and ended with my departure on 2 June. I went first to a training session for the district subgovernors who were implementing the program we developed. While the session was organized by the 173rd, it was designed as an all-Afghan affair in which the subgovernors of Wardak and Lowgar could exchange experiences and learn from each other. It was another step along the road of self-sufficiency.

After an opening, I met Governor Fidai of Wardak Province to push the visit I was arranging to coordinate the nonkinetic (nonfighting) side of counterinsurgency and to build an exit strategy for the military. The meeting was to include people from UNAMA, the World Bank, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), and Afghanistan's Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG, the agency responsible for local government). Over a couple of hours, we



discussed President Karzai, Governor Lodin of Lowgar Province, and the upcoming Peace Jirga (traditional tribal gathering) to be held in Kabul. Fidai's English is good, which helped a great deal.

Then Colonel Matt McFarlane, commander of the 1st Battalion Airborne located in Maydan Shahr, took us to the local bazaar to buy flatbread, which ended up being lunch. The tour around the market square at Maydan Shahr, the capital of Wardak, was bizarre. We had at least 20 troopers to keep us safe, although our tour was supposed to demonstrate how safe Maydan Shahr was. The troopers, in full battle gear, knelt around us scanning the crowd with their scopes as we stopped to talk to shopkeepers—not instilling a strong sense of security or stability. But McFarlane told me that not many months before it would have been impossible for foreigners to walk through Maydan Shahr regardless of the number of security people. Steve Petraeus, David's son, was our personal security team leader.

Some of the shops were stifling. I was in body armor, heavy in the dust and heat.

McFarlane was terrific with people in the street and shops, though he would have been so much better without the full battle gear and large gun. As the face of the world's most powerful military, he oversaw resources beyond anything any Afghan could imagine. No wonder they expected him to fix everything from their leaky roof to compensation for the Taliban burning down their house. He got a ton of complaints about the government, the Taliban, the lack of the rule of law, and much more. He balanced sympathy with practicality, not taking responsibility, offering to help move the Afghan system, and emphasizing the need for Afghans to find Afghan solutions. McFarlane was a strong supporter of the People's Development Fund exactly because it gave Afghans the resources and accountability to deal with their problems.

The next day had a silver lining, when Governor Lodin of Lowgar province canceled his regular monthly meeting with Colonel Johnson when neither the governor nor his designate, the deputy governor, showed up. That meant the lunch planned for the meeting went begging, but not for long, and we gathered in the commander's conference room. It was unexpectedly good. It came from the Afghan restaurant on the base. Most bases in Afghanistan have Afghan restaurants run by locals that serve decent food by base standards and good coffee.

The more time I spent at Shank, the more I became convinced that the greatest enemy of those on a forward operating base was not

improvised explosive devices, not the Taliban, but boredom. By definition, a forward operating base is in a war zone with a lot going on and people, or at least some people, working incredibly long hours (Jim Johnson and his command team regularly work till midnight or later and are up at 6).

But life on the base distributes neither boredom nor work evenly. The grunts, the privates, have nothing whatsoever to do there. I saw too many listless, glazed-eyed young soldiers. Even those who went out on patrol did it only for a few hours a day. Yes, there was rifle practice, physical training, and other training, but that left a great deal of time to kill. I guess there must be movies and other organized entertainment, but they can't be anywhere near enough. How the soldiers stand the tedium is beyond me.

One way: later in my stay, I learned from Jay Baker, the brigade doctor, that a surprising number of female soldiers got pregnant during the year the 173rd was in Afghanistan. Although privacy is one of the rarest commodities on a forward operating base, where there is a will, apparently in the army there is a way.

I spent one day on the logistics of getting people from the World Bank, UN, AusAID, and IDLG to our area of operation. My organizing that visit was a case of the blind leading the blind. The Kabul people, especially those from the Bank, were as lost around the military as I was when I first started working in Afghanistan. My task was to get this group into the military side of Kabul International Airport so they could catch the helicopter I arranged to bring them to Shank.

CUBs, Commander's Update Briefings, occurred almost daily. Either Jim Johnson's command team and his staff briefed him, or he and his staff briefed higher-ups at Bagram: General Scaparrotti, the RC-East commanding general, and his civilian counterpart, Dawn Liberi, RC-East senior civilian.

When Jim was briefed, the topics could range from the apparently trivial to life-threatening. From one day's CUB a few outtakes:

- Fragmentary orders, partial orders the army sends when it wants to get them out quickly. They included the need to sort and recycle refuse on the base and training polling station workers to run elections.
- Concept of operations, which describes conditions in the area of operation. The S2 (intelligence unit) gives the concept of

operations, usually starting with the weather report. I have learned that helicopters are much more affected by weather than fixed-wing planes and can be grounded by storms, wind, and dust. The S2 brief then moves on to Intel (intelligence) updates—where the enemy is, why some areas are seeing more action than others, and a description of all recent attacks on forward operating bases and command operating bases.

- Then the various task forces under Jim's command gave their reports. They covered everything from resource needs to recent attacks to who in the area is being good and who is being bad. The brigade measures resources in days of supply and color-codes them—green, ok; amber, a potential problem; red, a big problem; black, out (one isolated outpost had been black on toilet paper for weeks). Among events, one report came in of a young Afghan male seen directing traffic—what the enemy does to avoid civilian casualties when they are planting improvised explosive devices. A patrol went to question him, and he took off on his motorcycle. A search of the area uncovered an improvised explosive device that was to be detonated by a pull wire to ensure that it hit the right people (us).
- The Shank report covered our recent indirect fire attack with mortars, rockets, and the like. There was a pattern: an attack at around 22:00 every two to three weeks on Friday or Saturday. (I hoped that the regularity kept up because I was due to leave well before the next one.)

Information operations: our using what the enemy does to turn the population against them. Because the attacks on Forward Operating Base Shank were pretty badly aimed (a couple of rockets launched from the hills in our general direction), several rockets fell outside the forward operating base's perimeter and endangered civilians. That threat to civilians coming from insurgents was the information operations message.

On my second trip, we seemed to make real progress, maybe a breakthrough or two. The embassy in Kabul was sending questions to John Lister, Jim Johnson's civilian counterpart. Dawn Liberi was sending someone to Shank to learn more. The advisor to a key Afghan ministry was enthusiastic.

I wished in some ways I did not have to leave with things starting to pop, but my job was to come up with ideas, create energy and momentum, and let others take the lead. Everyone had been on board before, but now they wanted to make it happen.

Jim Johnson and I agreed that I would return the last week in July for three weeks, and then in the last week in September for a last trip before the 173rd returned to Vicenza, Italy. He would speak to the commander of the 4/10th, which would take over Shank, about the value of having someone like me. It would be easy to keep me since my contract allowed an extension for a second year.

But in 2018 as I review this, I find it hard to believe how naive I was, and I wonder how I dropped the ball. It turned out that whether I wanted to or not, I could not rebuild another brigade relationship. Before I agreed to a second-year contract, I traveled to the home base of the 4/10th brigade at Fort Polk, Louisiana, to meet the new commander, Bruce Antonia. Although at Fort Polk Antonia indicated enthusiasm for my continuing to work in his area of operation, later on the ground in Afghanistan he regarded it as a matter for civilians on the base, not him or his troops. Antonia was simply not interested in the softer side of his mission, and I knew from experience that without his support I was not likely to succeed and would be in for a very frustrating ride.

#### FOURTH VISIT, JULY–AUGUST 2010

I can tell from my notes home that I was beginning to see that the People's Development Fund was perhaps not destined to save the world, or at least not this time. Here is what I wrote:

Getting tired and still a ways to go. I have finished a draft of the next in a series of short papers on our work. Jay is taking a first look. Will send the next draft to any who are interested. Tomorrow, Monday, 9 August, the travel starts, although I will be back in Shank tomorrow night. Fortunately, we have re-worked our Tuesday/Wednesday schedule and will return to Shank Tuesday night and fly from here to Airborne Wednesday. That means one less place (Sayd Abad) to which I have to carry all my stuff. We then go up to Kabul Thursday late afternoon for a meeting on Friday before I leave with H.R. McMaster to discuss working with him if things do not work out with the 410th and its commander, Antonia. Let's hope the weather cooperates. As always it is exciting and invigorating, but exhausting. I will be happy to be heading home.

Speaking of weather, there was another B6 (Col. Johnson) story today. He and John Lister were to leave for meetings in Bagram early this morning. As I heard it, they ended up on a non-TF Bayonet flight (another helicopter that had come to Shank) because the pilots who fly the Shank birds

refused to because of the weather, and pilots have the final say. TF Brawler runs the air transport system, which is another command, so they are not under B6's direct command. Their commander serves two brigades and decides who gets what, which drives Jim nuts. This morning the pilots said that they wouldn't fly because visibility was less than a mile. Jim looked up, saw mountains that he knew were two miles away, dropped his pack and stormed off to call Brawler. Harsh words followed. I heard this story from Sean Wead, the brigade chaplain, who was supposed to go to Airborne but did not. Sean said that when Jim returned he told Sean that he regretted he had used some rather strong language. Sean said he absolved Jim on the spot (none of this serious I am sure). I don't think the birds flew but at least Jim got it out of his system. For a quiet introverted kind of guy, he can really throw a tantrum.

I have been working hard and burning a lot of adrenaline and can feel it right now. Every once in a while, there is this let-down when I just want to stop the train and get off. Of course, I won't, but it is tempting. I have emailed Bruce Antonia, the new commander a couple of times and had no response (he did get back to me once, so I know he knows me). On the one hand, I see very little option but for him to continue this program [oh so wrong in hindsight]; on the other, it's his call.

We've come so far I would hate to see this stopped. In a way it is a unique experiment testing how I believe development should be done. Very few people in my business get that opportunity. Of course, having the opportunity is both exhilarating and terrifying. Since what we are trying has never been done before, I have to act much more confident in what I am doing and advising than I actually am. I have to believe and convince others that I believe. I do—believe, that is—and the early returns certainly look good, but there is always the sense of waiting for the other shoe to drop. But if it does work, ... wow, it could serve as the first shot of a revolution, not just in counterinsurgency but in the way international development is done!

### LAST VISIT, SEPTEMBER 2010

My communication with the head of the World Bank office in Kabul and a key staff member provides a good summary of our project when I started my last trip to Afghanistan:

Thought a quick summary might be useful. We had Abdul Rahman of NSP (National Solidarity Program) down to Baraki Barak and Sayd Abad. The visit went very well. Extremely useful on our side, but, as well, for Abdul Rahman. I hope that we have created a working relationship

between subgovernor Neimatullah and the CDC [community development communities] community. For Baraki Barak, there was already a relationship.

We also had [General David] Petraeus and [Ambassador Karl] Eikenberry down (and 70+ hangers-on) and briefed them on the People's Development Fund concept.

I have prepared a note on the People's Development Fund which talks about some of the experience to date.<sup>2</sup> The next challenge will be to keep enthusiasm from overwhelming its core principle, which is to make sure that accountability shifts to the Afghans.

I also need to find a way to strengthen the link to the donor community that will eventually have to take up the program's funding, and [the link] to the minister of finance, who does not like off-budget financing, which this is not intended to be. On the donor community, in September I am to brief the monthly ambassador's caucus that Petraeus chairs.

The more I think about it, the more I don't see how the 4/10th and I are going to work out. Todd Coe, the new Bo [Stuart—in charge of civil affairs for the brigade], will come up at 15:00 tomorrow to take me back to Shank, and that is when I will learn what is going on—or start to learn.

As wonderful as my experience had been with the 173rd, all good things must come to an end. When the 4/10th brigade took over from the 173rd in Afghanistan, the new commander made it clear to me that he was not serious about pursuing the People's Development Fund even though his predecessor had taken most of the risks.

While the 4/10th did not entirely dismiss the People's Development Fund, its commander saw governance and development as a civilian function and told me in effect to work with or for the senior civilian at Shank. Although the project was in fact designed to be transferred eventually to civilian hands, the dysfunctionality and disarray of the civilian side of US efforts in Afghanistan meant that without the military's backing at this early stage, the effort would be doomed. My experience with the 173rd had convinced me that the only hope of expanding the reach of the People's Development Fund was to stay connected to the military. I decided enough was enough.

With a substantial amount of money still in my contract I left the 4/10th and moved to Kabul, temporarily joining the unit that H.R. McMaster headed, Force Shafafiyat (Pashto for transparency) International Security Assistance Force.

But it was not a fit. Petraeus had tasked H.R.'s unit with reining in Afghan's endemic corruption. The People's Development Fund did not belong with that work, and I did not feel that the approach Force Shafafiyat was taking to control corruption had much chance of success. I quickly concluded that the necessary people would not hear my voice or ideas above the Kabul cacophony.

So I went to H.R. and submitted my resignation, telling him that I could not get a foothold to move the People's Development Fund forward and that I was wasting the army's money and my time. I also said that I would be back in a blink if there were ever anything for me to do that would help him, Petraeus, and the war effort. H.R. was kind enough to thank me in front of my unit colleagues for doing the right thing by stepping down. My resignation was an enormously sad moment for me—my time with the US military had been one of the most rewarding experiences of my professional and my personal life.

## NOTES

1. Though this may have been part of the story, the fact that the Chinese insurgents who were in Malaysia were a foreign invading force makes the Malaysia–Vietnam comparison a stretch.
2. See Chapter 4 for details on the People's Development Fund.



## CHAPTER 4

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# Reflections on Afghanistan

**Abstract** The United States and international community went to Afghanistan because after 9/11 they saw Afghanistan and the people it harbored as a security risk. Given that goal, the non-battle side of counterinsurgency should aim not at state building but at stabilization. Aid delivery by outsiders undermines the Afghan government at both the national and local levels. The People's Development Fund supported people's confidence in local government by assigning a great deal of authority to fund development projects to local Afghan governments so long as decisions represented the local population and projects met stringent transparency requirements. A pilot program beginning in June 2010 produced successful projects that responded to local judgments about what communities needed.

**Keywords** Afghanistan · People's Development Fund  
Counterinsurgency · Local government · Development aid

A June 2011 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report concluded that US aid efforts in Afghanistan had failed.<sup>1</sup> At that time, the United States was on course to spend nearly 50% more in Afghanistan on development assistance in fiscal years 2010–2015 than it had in all the fiscal years before 2010.

Could the United States be doubling down on an already bad bet? Subsequent history suggests the answer is a resounding Yes!



Afghanistan is at once a story of too much and too little. Too much ambition, too much hubris, too much international money, too many international advisors and contractors; too little humility, too little coordination, too little patience, too little continuity, too little understanding of international development or Afghan history. The result was a pattern of actions and strategies that undermined the goal the international community had when it went to Afghanistan: to create an Afghanistan that no longer posed a threat to world security. Note that this goal is not the same as building a democratic Afghan state.

### WHY WE WERE IN AFGHANISTAN

To understand what we did wrong in Afghanistan we need to start by understanding why the international community and, especially, the United States were there. They were in Afghanistan with a massively costly military and development assistance effort—rather than in 1 of 50 or more other poor, fragile states—because the post-9/11 world saw Afghanistan and the people it harbored as a security risk.

This threat to world security is the only possible rationale for the extraordinary commitment of troops, aid, and effort. If security is the reason for international intervention in Afghanistan, then everything we did should have been viewed through a security lens.

Ironically, as the war drew to an initial close (2013), or as that phase of the war wound down, we may finally have started to achieve some clarity on our primary goal in Afghanistan.

Although the world's leaders were seldom willing to say so publicly, with increasing frequency they did indicate that “success” in Afghanistan means achieving “good enough” stability there so that foreign troops can leave and Afghanistan and its international development partners can get on with the country's daunting development and state-building agenda.

To achieve this end, we needed to focus on stabilization. Stabilization is at the foundation of the US approach to defeating insurgencies as set out in General Petraeus and General Amos's counterinsurgency manual (US Army and US Marine Corps 2007). Stabilization is not nation-building.<sup>2</sup> It is a strategy that aims to create a “good enough” foundation on which a country with international development assistance can begin to implement longer-term development and state-building programs.

We need to build this foundation in a way that gives us reasonable confidence that a country will not slip back into insurgency once foreign troops depart. Stabilization has two components, “security” and what I call, for lack of a better term, “governance.”

The security or kinetic component is what the 100,000 plus Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops and the efforts to train and equip Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) aimed at. Assessing progress on these efforts is not, as my military colleagues would put it, “in my lane,” but suffice it to say that Afghanistan presents some deep and worrisome concerns.

The governance component is all the nonkinetic—nonfighting—part of counterinsurgency. It is what the military does under its Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP) and what the State Department, USAID, and other donors do with their development and governance funds.

The United States often refers to a core element of the nonkinetic part of counterinsurgency as “winning hearts and minds,” an unfortunate and misunderstood phrase. Especially in the US Congress and press, winning hearts and minds has too often been taken to mean that the primary US nonmilitary objective in Afghanistan is to convince the Afghan people that the US and coalition members are their friends. This interpretation, a misreading of the counterinsurgency agenda, produced a good part of what went wrong with the US program in Afghanistan.

The governance side of the counterinsurgency agenda was about linking the Afghan people to their government so that they side with their state rather than the insurgents. Stability in Afghanistan (or any other fragile state) can only be achieved in one of two ways: by giving the people a reason to believe in and support their government over the enemy, or by large-scale semipermanent occupation.

The objective of linking people to their government is not so different from the international donor community’s objective in fragile states. If we have learned anything from international development experience in the past half-century, it is that institution-building, nation-building, state-building all take time—certainly years, maybe decades, in some cases generations. But the evidence of the past half-century also underscores that they need to be country-driven, not donor-driven.

Early interventions need to create a stable foundation for these country efforts. If they don’t, donors will find they have to redo past

development programs and projects time and time again, which has been the case in far too many fragile states.

### WHAT THE UNITED STATES KNEW WHEN IT WENT IN, OR SHOULD HAVE KNOWN...

While hindsight may or may not be 20/20, it is certainly clearer than foresight. It would be unfair and not especially useful to grade the US and coalition strategy in Afghanistan by what we know now but did not know in the late 1990s and early 2000 when the United States was formulating Afghanistan strategy. So, what did we know then?

#### *...About Afghanistan*

In 2001, Afghanistan was not one of Donald Rumsfeld's "unknown unknowns," or even "known unknowns." We knew a great deal about Afghanistan before we engaged the Taliban there (O'Connell 2017). We knew that Afghanistan is a conservative, proud, highly religious, largely illiterate, poor, rural, tribal society. Three major tribal groups, the Pashtun, the Tajik, and the Hazaras, along with serious numbers of Uzbeks, Turkmens, and others, vie for power and control over sources of wealth, from minerals to opium. Afghanistan's Islamic roots go back to the seventh century when what is now Afghanistan was invaded by Arab Muslims.

By the end of the ninth century, most of central Asia from southern Russia through the north of India, including the area that is now Afghanistan, had converted to Islam (Karabell 2007). So, religious roots run deep and wide.

Afghanistan was historically also part of what Fred Starr (2013) calls the Age of Enlightenment in Central Asia from roughly 800 to 1200, a period when Greater Central Asia, including Afghanistan, was truly the world center of arts, science, and innovation.

As a deeply religious, traditional society, Afghanistan in 2001 was not a great candidate for western-style nation building. Widespread illiteracy compounded the challenge.

Official estimates indicate that fewer than 30% of Afghans can read and write, but the actual rate is anyone's guess. The World Bank's DATABANK lists the last measured adult literacy as 18% in 1979.

Subsequent figures cited by UNESCO and others are extrapolations based on school attendance. One recent report cites a figure of 90% illiteracy among Afghanistan's army. Literacy rates may have improved in the past 10 years but by how much is impossible to say.

Most Afghans live outside urban areas and subsist outside the formal economy, some in areas so remote that they are unreachable during the winter months. Eight in ten Afghans depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Afghanistan's per capita income ranks in the bottom decile among the world's countries. Health statistics are what you would expect, although there has been progress on that front since 2001: immunization rates have doubled, TB prevalence halved, and primary school attendance up by 50%—all, of course, from low bases, but progress nonetheless.

The historical complexity and competition among these groups is too long a story to tell here, but a partial table of contents from Peter R. Blood (2001)'s *Afghanistan: A Country Study* illustrates it (Box 4.1). The message is clear: Afghanistan has been in flux externally and internally for millennia. Afghanistan's history is replete with invasion and external military intervention.

**Box 4.1 Partial table of contents from *Afghanistan: A country study*, covering 1747–1989**

Ahmad Shah and the Durrani Empire  
 The Great Game  
 The Rise of Dost Mohammad  
 The First Anglo-Afghan War  
 Abdur Rahman Khan, "The Iron Amir," 1880–1901  
 Consolidation of the Modern State  
 Modernization and Development of Institutions  
 The Reign of King Habibullah, 1901–1919  
 The Reign of King Amanullah, 1919–1929  
 Third Anglo-Afghan War and Independence  
 Reform, Popular Reaction, and Forced Abdication  
 Tajik Rule, January–October 1929  
 Muhammad Nadir Shah, 1929–33  
 Mohammad Zahir Shah, 1933–73  
 Sahir Shah and His Uncles, 1933–53

### The Pashtunistan Issue

Early Links with the Soviet Union

Experiment with Liberalized Politics

Daoud as Prime Minister, 1953–63

The King Reigns: The Last Decade of the Monarchy, 1963–73

Daoud's Republic, July 1973–April 1978

Communism, Rebellion, and Soviet Intervention

*Source* Blood (2001).

Through this difficult history, the Afghan people have shown remarkable consistency and tenacity in resisting what they do not like and outlasting the country's invaders; the history of Afghan's resistance to outsiders begins in the fourth century BCE, when what is now Afghanistan rejected Alexander the Great's invasion attempts (Holt 2006). In more modern times, there were the defeat of the British in 1919 (considered modern Afghanistan's year of independence); the 1989 expulsion of the Russians; and, possibly to a lesser extent, the 2001 defeat of the Taliban.

Between these occupations, the country had its share of domestic instability as the various clans competed for power. Since the mid-eighteenth century when Ahmad Shah Durrani established his rule over the area we now know as Afghanistan, the country has seen near constant internal tension as Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Uzbeks vied for power and control.

### *...About the Neighborhood*

The world did not bless Afghanistan with good neighbors (Map 4.1). Its Central Asian neighbors to the north comprise one of the most isolated countries in the world (Turkmenistan), an autocratically governed reform-resistant state (Uzbekistan), and a near-failed, post-conflict state whose principal claim to fame is as a transit route for Afghan opium (Tajikistan). The passage of time has softened these harsh descriptions a bit, especially Uzbekistan's, but not entirely.

To the west is Iran, itself a source of global instability, with interests in Afghanistan that do not include supporting the US role there. To the east, Afghanistan shares a short border with China by way of the inappropriately named Wakhan Corridor, through which virtually no roads penetrate. However, the real neighborhood issue is to the south.



**Map 4.1** Afghanistan and its neighbors (*Source* Central Intelligence Agency)

To the south and southeast is Pakistan. Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan grow out of its deep-seated paranoia over India. In the minds of Pakistan's military and security elements, if Pakistan did not maintain a controlling interest in Afghanistan, India might fill the void, which would mean "enemies" to the north as well as to the south. For the United States, Pakistan is one of the most difficult "security partners" ever. An indeterminate blend of ally and enemy, Pakistan confounds, confuses, and frustrates US policymakers.

Though Pakistan faced its own Taliban-driven insurgency problem, it harbored much of the Taliban leadership, and Osama bin Laden. It provided safe refuge for Afghanistan's Taliban fighters during the winter months.

So intertwined are US interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan that the December 2008 CENTCOM Assessment Team review organized by

Petraeus combined the two countries in a single “AfPak” country grouping. Remarkably, even though at that time the United States had large commitments of troops and resources in Afghanistan, most of the discussion in the AfPak group was about Pakistan. A widely held view in the group was that the solution to Afghanistan would not be found in Afghanistan but in Pakistan.

### ...About State-Building

What did we know about state-building prospects under these circumstances? International development experience over the past half-century offers a lesson about building institutions—capacity—in such settings. This lesson is a part of an often confused discussion over aid effectiveness best illustrated by two lines of argument, one by Bill Easterly of *White Man’s Burden* (2006) fame and Dambisa Moyo, the author of *Dead Aid* (2009), the second by Charles Kenny in *Getting Better* (2011). Easterly and Moyo argue that international aid expenditures have been a colossal waste of taxpayers’ money for the past half-century; Kenny that across a broad spectrum of attributes and countries, poor people are much better off today than a 100 or even 50 years ago. Both are right.

Easterly and Moyo focus on the international aid record in building the capacity and institutions that would allow developing countries to grow and to providing the foundations necessary for those countries to pursue growth and poverty reduction on their own. Kenny’s analysis concerns the outcomes of what one might call international welfare assistance, the international record on improving health, reducing child and maternal mortality, and raising literacy rates, things that, for the most part, rich countries did for developing countries.

Both sides in this debate agree that functioning institutions take a very long time to create. This statement applies across the full spectrum of developing countries but with special force to the very poorest, most fragile countries (Collier 2007). Paul Collier’s thesis in *Bottom Billion* is that there is a critical timing mismatch between fragile state development needs and the speed with which working institutions, be they education, health, security, judiciary, or civil service, can be created. His solution is to have the international community take over the development and management of these institutions. A step few countries, rich or poor, appear willing to take, and a strategy with which I disagree, as there may be no exit from it and it will simply put off the capacity-building challenge to another day.

The message from international development experience is that at the beginning of the war, Afghanistan was among the least likely candidates for fast-track democratization and modernization.

History, culture, and a lengthy track record of state-building failures on the part of the international community should have told us then that mixing long-term state-building and development programs with short-term stabilization and security needs is a recipe for waste, inefficiency, and ultimately failure on both counts.

### *...About Counterinsurgency*

David Galula, a French military officer with vast insurgency experience, is considered by many to have written the “bible” on counterinsurgency. Brett Reeder’s (n.d.) excellent summary of Galula’s *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (1964), points out that while Galula’s examples are dated (his book is over 40 years old), “its insights remain hauntingly relevant.”

According to Galula, there are four “laws” of counterinsurgency.

1. The first law is that the population is paramount. That is, the support of the people is the primary objective of a counterinsurgency campaign. Without the support of the population, it is impossible to root out all the insurgents and stop further recruitment.
2. Such support is most readily obtained from an active minority. Those willing to actively support a counterinsurgency operation should be supported in their efforts to rally the relatively neutral majority and neutralize the hostile minority.
3. Having attained the support of the population it is imperative to remember that this support is conditional. What you do matters, and support can be lost if your actions are unfavorable to the population.
4. The fourth and final law of counterinsurgency regards the “intensity of effort and vastness of means.” Because counterinsurgency requires a large concentration of effort, resources, and personnel, it is unlikely that it can be pursued effectively everywhere at once. Rather, action should be taken in select areas, and resources moved as needed. Thus, according to the laws of counterinsurgency, it is important to continuously make efforts at gaining and maintaining the support of the populace in distinct areas by leveraging an active minority.



Galula's first law is at the base of the pilot program in Afghanistan developed by the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which will be discussed in this chapter. Reeder goes on to say:

Keeping this emphasis on political action and the laws of counterinsurgency in mind, Galula develops a comprehensive strategy for dealing effectively with hot insurgencies. Galula divides his strategy into eight steps:

1. Concentrate enough armed forces to destroy or to expel the main body of armed insurgents.
2. Detach for the area sufficient troops to oppose an insurgent's comeback in strength; install these troops in the hamlets, villages, and towns where the population lives.
3. Establish contact with the population and control its movements in order to cut off its links with the guerrillas.
4. Destroy the local insurgent political organizations.
5. Set up, by means of elections, new provisional local authorities.
6. Test these authorities by assigning them various concrete tasks. Replace the softs and the incompetents and give full support to the active leaders. Organize self-defense units.
7. Group and educate the leaders in a national political movement.
8. Win over or suppress the last insurgent remnants.

## WHAT THE UNITED STATES DID IN AFGHANISTAN

In 2013, the US 13-year-and-growing involvement in Afghanistan divides into two parts. In the early period, Iraq was the preoccupation and Afghanistan an afterthought. In the later period, the United States could no longer ignore Afghanistan, and moreover the United States was looking for ways to distract its citizens and the world from the less-than-perfect outcomes in Iraq.

### *A Brief History of the Buildup*

On the military side, US engagement in Afghanistan started out right. US special forces and air strikes supported the Northern Alliance as it fought and defeated the Taliban.

During this early phase, it was Afghanistan's fight, with the United States supporting. The battle for Mazar-i-Sharif involved fewer than 100 US special forces troops, a lot of air support, but no conventional troops (Stanton 2009). In FY 2002 the US had just 5200 "boots on the ground," the military's way of counting combat troops (Belasco 2014). Over the next 6 years there was a steady troop buildup, but even by FY 2008, the United States had only 30,000 combat troops on Afghan soil.

Beginning in 2009, under the Obama presidency, Afghanistan became the center of attention for US counterinsurgency war efforts. As the Iraq withdrawal accelerated, Afghan deployments increased dramatically. By FY 2010, the number of US combat troops in Afghanistan stood at 63,500, more than double FY 2008 levels (see Fig. 4.1).

As troop numbers increased, so too did pressure on the civilian side of the US effort to up its game. From 2009 to 2013, US official civilian numbers increased more than threefold to 1300 from 390 as the Department of State and USAID did what they could to match the troop buildup.

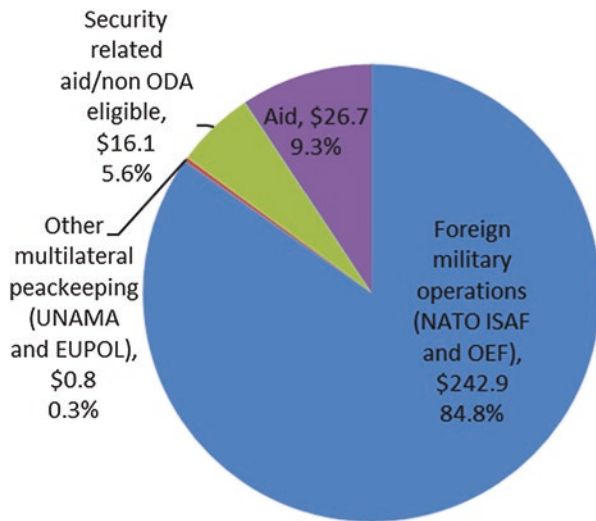
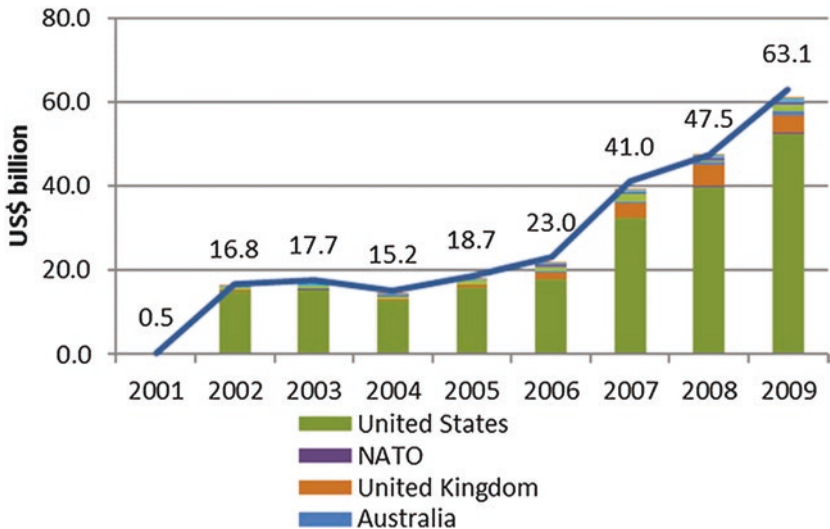


Fig. 4.1 Foreign assistance flows to Afghanistan, 2002–2009

### *The Money*

The resources the world has put into Afghanistan since 2002 are staggering (Fig. 4.1). According to the National Priorities Project,<sup>3</sup> since the Afghan war's inception, taxpayers in the United States have paid \$4 million *every hour* for the cost of that war. By 2017, this came to a total of nearly \$800,000,000,000 and counting, as expenditures continued apace and the cost of maintaining order in Afghanistan did not stop with initial coalition troop withdrawals. And these are only the direct costs—work at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies<sup>4</sup> suggests that the final cost will exceed \$3.7 trillion.

In development assistance alone, Afghanistan's donors have pledged an astonishing \$62 billion since 2002, more than \$2300 per capita, more than four times (nominal) income per capita (Fig. 4.2). These good intentions have not always panned out. As of 2009, the donor community disbursed \$26.7 billion—less than half of the pledged amounts. As large as aid expenditures are, they represent less than 10% of total international spending in Afghanistan since 2002.



**Fig. 4.2** Partial costs of US-Led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and NATO-Led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), 2001–2009 (\$ billion budgeted). *Source* Poole (2011)

Afghanistan is formally a coalition effort, but the United States dominated it in every respect. On the military front, the United States accounted for most of the money (see Fig. 4.2) and most of the fighting troops.

Regarding nonmilitary foreign aid, in 2008 and 2009, Afghanistan was the world's largest aid recipient. Up to November 2013, it was second only to Israel as a recipient of US aid (Brinkley 2013). Regarding pure development assistance, Afghanistan is number one. Development assistance going into Afghanistan exceeded government revenues by a factor of six in 2008 and nearly five in 2009, implying an unaffordable and unsustainable aid program.

The United States dominates the aid picture as well as the military one, accounting for more than 60% of pledged assistance between 2002 and 2013. The picture is a little more balanced when we look at what the United States has spent, mostly because the United States had the worst disbursement record of all coalition countries and the multilateral organizations, accounting for just over 40% of 2002–2009 disbursements.

These astonishing numbers notwithstanding, some have argued that Afghanistan has suffered from a shortfall of resources. Is there, or was there ever, a case for more aid to Afghanistan?

### *How Aid to Afghanistan Stacks Up*

I am not qualified to comment on the Afghan military campaign except to say that we have obviously not done what we set out to do—defeat or contain the insurgents so that they are no longer a threat to Afghanistan's stability and internal or international security. We may be making progress on the so-called kinetic (fighting) side of the war effort, but the ongoing debate about the pace of troop withdrawal suggests that not everyone is comfortable with getting out now, including many Afghans.

On the aid side, it would take several books to document the programs the international community has undertaken in Afghanistan. That is, if we had accurate information on how the coalition spent the money, which I do not think we do.

The argument I develop below focuses mainly on bilateral coalition–Afghanistan efforts rather than multilateral programs (from institutions such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations system, and so on). Leaving the multilaterals out is no great loss

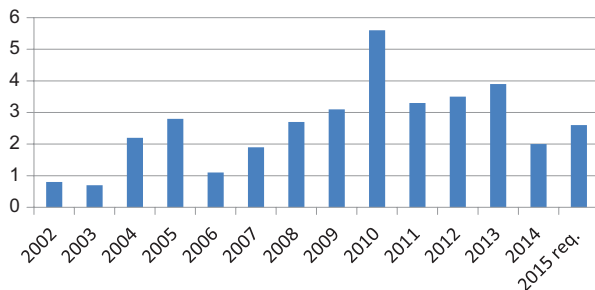
since multilateral development programs account for less than 10% of the development assistance pledges Afghanistan has received since 2002.

USAID is the big development money player in Afghanistan. As the war has dragged on, it has become ever bigger. The aid figures I cite above stop at 2009, but State/USAID's spending took off after that (Fig. 4.3). In the five fiscal years (FY) 2010–2015, USAID was expected to spend or obligate an amount exceeding by more than 40% what it spent in the 2001–2009 period: an additional \$20.9 billion, bringing the agency's total commitment to Afghanistan since 2001 to \$35.4 billion—this for a country of just under 30 million people.

Some have called for increasing aid to Afghanistan. Matt Waldman, author of Oxfam's 2008 Afghanistan report, states that “in the two years following international intervention, Afghanistan received \$57 per capita, while Bosnia and East Timor received \$679 and \$233 per capita respectively.” By the numbers, it would seem that the international aid community shortchanged Afghanistan in the early years of the war.

Subsequent behavior suggests the international community took this criticism to heart. By 2009, Afghan aid per capita had risen to \$206. With the near doubling of (committed) USAID assistance in FY 2010, and assuming other donors hold to their previous levels, Afghanistan would be receiving \$300 per capita in development assistance, topping East Timor but still half the rate of Bosnia.

But what does it mean to compare development assistance to Afghanistan with Bosnia and East Timor? The comparison with Bosnia is



**Fig. 4.3** Estimated state department/USAID funding in Afghanistan, FY 2001/12–2014/15 (*Source* Congressional Research Service)

a stretch. There is a reason why USAID has a 40% disbursement rate in Afghanistan.

Bosnia's capacity to absorb external assistance was orders of magnitude greater than Afghanistan's. In Afghanistan, even the multilateral institutions, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, were only able to spend about half of their 2001–2009 commitment by 2009.

East Timor would seem a better comparison. It is poor, with a largely rural illiterate population and fraying infrastructure. There are however two problems with such a comparison. The first is scale: East Timor has a million people, Afghanistan 30 million. Small countries need more aid resources per capita than large countries to develop because there are economies of scale in the development business.

But the real issue is effectiveness. As I argue in Chapter 5 and elsewhere (2011), the donor record in East Timor is not good, and for much the same reason as Afghanistan's: too much development assistance for a weak national system to absorb. Given the ineffectiveness with which donors have used aid in East Timor, an argument for more assistance to Afghanistan based on East Timor's experience doesn't hold up.

Afghanistan has been overwhelmed with development assistance, but this quantity story is the tip of the iceberg. The real story lies with how the coalition spent the money.

## IN AFGHANISTAN STABILITY IS THE AIM, GOVERNANCE THE GAME

Since 2001, the United States alone has committed more than a trillion dollars to the Afghanistan war effort. What, exactly, has the international community gotten for this enormous expenditure? More to the point, what have Afghans gotten? The short answer is that neither got what they wanted or needed.

Afghans have seen their economy distorted and their government undermined by huge foreign currency inflows and the corruption that comes with them. What oil is to Nigeria or Chad, military and donor expenditures were to Afghanistan. No way to develop a stable country.

Some 80% of the international community's assistance was "aid with little or no Afghan government involvement" (Poole 2011). The figure would be even higher if we included, say, the National Solidarity

Program (NSP), technically run by an Afghan ministry but practically run by the World Bank.

The dominance of aid delivery by outsiders is one of the great mistakes the coalition made in Afghanistan. In a country where people started out with little faith in their government, coalition actions on a near-daily basis told them they were right: their government was neither interested in nor capable of providing them with even minimal support and services.

I remember overhearing a conversation between an Afghan minister and a senior military officer in Kabul recounting a trip the minister had recently taken with a senior US official to visit the governor of a nearby province.

The minister was calling to complain. At the meeting, the governor asked him for financial help with a priority development project. The minister said he would love to help but did not have the money. The ambassador immediately said, “Not to worry—I do.” The minister said his credibility went to zero at that point. This usurping of government credibility happened daily at every level of government.

At every turn, the coalition did its damndest to signal to the Afghan people that their government is incapable of even the most basic service provision. We did it all and then wondered why the average Afghan has no time for his or her government.

### *The Vicious Cycle of Bypassing Local Government*

One of the most important outcomes of the July 2010 Kabul Peace Jurga (conference) was the agreement between the government of Afghanistan and donors to increase substantially the amount of donor assistance that flows through government channels. Unless and until the government of Afghanistan is seen to be delivering services and development for the Afghan people, there is little hope for the long-term stability that the country needs and the coalition wants. Afghans must see their government, not the international community, as accountable and delivering needed services.

Past efforts to achieve this transfer of accountability from donors to the government stumbled on a chicken-and-egg quandary that has befuddled international capacity-building efforts for decades.

Governments need capacity before donors trust them with resources, but without resources to manage there is little reason for governments to

develop or maintain capacity. Even when capacity has improved, donors have been slow to reward governments with increased budget support and responsibility.

With nothing to manage, capacity quickly depreciates. This vicious cycle of little or no capacity/no accountability, no accountability/no incentive to invest in or maintain capacity has produced an abysmal capacity-building record throughout the international development community for decades.

Worse still, even as this we-will-develop-you-at-whatever-cost strategy was failing, our policy response has been to double down, to throw even more money at the problem. “More of the same but this time we’re serious” does not constitute a new strategy.

The US government did not set out to make the Afghan government look bad, but the incentives it and Congress provided to those setting up Afghan programs and implementing those programs ended up doing just that. The first incentive was bureaucratic and budgetary survival. No federal agency worth its salt could afford to be seen as anything but fully responsive to what was *the* US foreign policy priority. As the US military scaled up, the nonmilitary side of the US government scrambled to keep pace and relevancy. The military buildup meant US government civilian “surges,” larger aid budgets, and more civilian “boots on the ground.”

Department of State and USAID staffing increases appear modest on the surface, to around 1300, but the real buildup came in the form of contract hires. USAID and the Department of State channeled most of their assistance to Afghanistan through a small number of large aid contractors (Table 4.1). Many brave and committed souls came to Afghanistan under these programs, eager to make the lives of Afghans better. But, again, incentives shaped how they went about achieving this worthy goal.

**Table 4.1** USAID implementing partners, 2011

Chemonics International	\$732,112,288
Partnership for Supply Chain Management	\$417,726,429
John Snow	\$396,293,699
DAI Washington	\$294,374,495
Berger Black Veatch Joint Venture	\$261,374,397
Tetra Tech DPK	\$210,366,294
International Resources Group	\$136,971,784
Abt Associates	\$121,906,364



The contractors faced four constraints that dampened any enthusiasm they might have had for working with the Afghan government: congressional oversight; the pressure to disburse; a centralized, one-size-fits-all decision-making structure; and the need for visibility.

On the congressional oversight front, contractors working in Afghanistan faced the impossible task of moving huge sums of money through a weak and corrupt system while being held accountable for “every dollar.” As the Afghanistan government’s reputation for corruption reached epic levels in the United States, the US public had to see US politicians as having zero tolerance on corruption, which translated into: don’t let our money get close to the Afghan government. The contractors’ solution: if you can’t go through them, go around them. Bypass the government entirely.

The pressure to disburse exacerbated the government’s weak implementation, driven by the sheer volume of aid resources going into Afghanistan. Every level of the US government felt the need to spend (Box 4.2). If you didn’t spend this year’s allocation, there was little hope for an increase in next year’s allocation. A cut might even be in order.

#### **Box 4.2 The imperative of spending**

The debilitating nature of the pressure to spend is illustrated by a conversation I had in the US embassy compound in late 2010 with one of the US government’s most senior and most experienced aid personnel. I had just finished making my case for how the huge sums the United States was putting into Afghanistan were undermining the Afghan government. My friend reflected for a moment and said, “I have to agree, but I have \$1.5 billion to spend this year, and spend it I will.” The primary US government instrument for moving money was Washington’s band of aid contractors.

Highly specific, top-down “deliverables” also constrained contractors, often congressionally mandated: build so many schools, health clinics; drill a set number of tube wells; create X kilometers of drainage and irrigation canals; and pave Y kilometers of new road. Sometimes these met local priorities, often they did not. Most of these projects gave little heed to local voices. However, they were free, so no one said no.

## WHAT SHOULD THE UNITED STATES HAVE DONE?

More money and more foreign-implemented programs were never the answer to Afghanistan's problems. The coalition would have better served stability if the Afghan government had been given resources and held accountable for using them effectively, even if this meant a slower pace of "development" in the conventional sense—more and better services to the Afghan people. Yes, holding a weak government accountable is a tall order, but there are ways to do it.

We need to recognize that modest programs delivered through the government trump blockbuster programs delivered through donors every time. We have to start by reining in the international community. Afghanistan's biggest problem during the first decade of the war was that a tsunami of donor assistance and an army of contractors brought in to deliver that assistance overwhelmed the country.

The first port of call in efforts to increase the flow of donor assistance through government systems has to be subnational governments, the face of government for most Afghans. Rebuilding Afghans' faith in their government should have started at the provincial and district levels, the only government most Afghans knew. Getting local governments to step up to the plate is not only possible; it happened in increasing numbers of provinces around the country, including through the People's Development Fund.

## COUNTERINSURGENCY IN AFGHANISTAN

So, what might work? How about the military's counterinsurgency strategy, which has not really been tried? It is about creating a stable foundation for security and development by giving people a reason to believe in their government.

When communities lack access to basic services, live in insecurity, and have no mechanisms for resolving disputes or protecting property rights, they become easy targets for insurgents and instability. In most fragile states, central governments are too weak, too distant, and too disorganized to provide these services and mechanisms. Afghanistan is no exception. Weak central governments are why counterinsurgency in Afghanistan should have focused on giving *local* governments, whether conventional or traditional, the support and room they need to serve

their citizens. (Yes, this is what provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) were designed in principle to do; the practice was another matter.)

The army built counterinsurgency on the principle that improved security creates the space for better governance, and better governance strengthens security gains. This “virtuous circle” is essential to achieving the stability Afghanistan needed to develop, and US troops needed to go home and to stay home. It is a circle that the military alone cannot create.

A successful counterinsurgency strategy has three pillars: an effective military/security campaign; an effective local development/governance campaign; and an exit strategy for US and other coalition troops. The Afghanistan counterinsurgency strategy had some of the first, a start to the second, and none of the third.

### *Whole of Government—An Essential Concept*

Counterinsurgency, as originally conceived, was intended to be a whole-of-government instrument involving all three major instruments of foreign policy: defense, diplomacy, and development. In practice, its application has been almost entirely military, at least at the lowest—and most critical—levels of government.

But counterinsurgency as a mainly or entirely military strategy cannot work. It cannot work because the military does not have the right human resources to achieve counterinsurgency goals and because an all-military counterinsurgency fails to recognize the long-term nature of local capacity building. As well-trained and dedicated as US forces are, the military is not, and should never be another development agency.

Security considerations may mean that military forces start local governance building. However, as soon as feasible, those responsibilities should be handed off, “transferred” to US and international development agencies (transfer is the last phase of the counterinsurgency agenda: “Shape, Clear, Hold, Build, and Transfer”). If it is to be successful, this process must involve civilian counterparts even when the military is the principal implementing agency. The irony is that all the pieces of this puzzle were in fact in place in Afghanistan—forward operating bases had civilian representatives; PRTs were joint military and civilian. So, why didn’t it work?

Partly it was that there was no one person in charge on the civilian side. On the forward operating bases, there was a “senior civilian” who

was in principle the civilian counterpart of the brigade commander, but in practice, civilian efforts in Afghanistan were dysfunctional and needed military support.

PRTs were an effort to supplement the military in delivering counterinsurgency in Afghanistan (and also in Iraq) and in the form—ostensibly civilian-staffed teams designed to supplement military efforts in delivering counterinsurgency. But PRT staffing was often problematic—regarding both experience and fitness for the assignment (Green 2012). This poor staffing meant, as Green observes, that the military often did not take PRT staff seriously. Poor staffing and the fact that PRTs often served several masters—the brigade commander being only one—meant that military–civilian counterinsurgency efforts were seldom coordinated—even well-intentioned teams need leadership.

If developing self-sustaining local governments is not possible in the time frame for US military engagement in Afghanistan, the US government and military need credible partners to which they can hand off local capacity-building efforts. The international community, particularly the international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, could be such partners. Development is, after all their day job, and they have the right instruments and experience to take it on. In Afghanistan, there was little connection between counterinsurgency and international donor efforts to build local governance.

### THE NATIONAL SOLIDARITY PROGRAM: A POSSIBLE AFGHAN CIVILIAN PARTNER FOR COUNTERINSURGENCY

The role of the military could have changed through a partnership with Afghanistan's NSP. It began in 2003. NSP is an Afghan program based on a similar program developed by the World Bank for Indonesia (Guggenheim 2004); in 2008, it was an internationally supported community development program active in 352 of Afghanistan's 364 districts. By 2008, it had disbursed over \$400 million through 50,000 individual projects.

Supported by the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), with World Bank oversight, and suitably modified the NSP would have been a natural partner to US counterinsurgency efforts. At NSP's core are 22,000 community development committees (CDCs) that use simple democratic principles to give communities the wherewithal to set priorities, monitor project implementation, and guard against corruption.

CDCs give citizens the ability to engage their local government structure and, by doing so, improve accountability and lay the foundation for a bottom-up democratic movement. CDCs are the kind of governance structure counterinsurgency needs to succeed—although as our efforts in Wardak and Lowgar demonstrated, other structures could and did work as well (traditional shuras, for example).

Although there are other US and international programs aimed at building local capacity, the NSP is a natural starting point for bridging US military and international donor efforts. It operates on a national scale, is more or less Afghan-owned, and is internationally financed.

As I was to learn, the NSP was not without its problems. It is too Kabul-driven, too much a victim of western cultural norms, and often not enough local control and accountability. The NSP is implemented by “facilitating partners,” mostly the World Bank and other international nongovernment organizations—hardly a picture of strong government ownership. Though studies show that the NSP is seen as a “government program” by many Afghans, it is also a source of tension in some districts because it is outside and independent of local government. There are instances of power-grabbing competition, with NSP cluster leaders challenging district subgovernors for the people’s support.

Both the US military and NSP would benefit from increased collaboration. The military would gain because NSP not only provides models of community development that work across Afghanistan’s diverse cultures but, critically, gives the military a strategy for sustaining counterinsurgency operations when international armed forces withdraw. In other words, NSP would give counterinsurgency the long-term staying power that a military-only counterinsurgency strategy does not have. It could give the US military an exit strategy from governance and development activities. It could give US policymakers a means of focusing limited military resources on critical security concerns. And it could give NSP a way of expanding its reach into communities most in need of governance support. Afghanistan must have a counterinsurgency strategy that will be with it long after foreign troops leave.

On NSP’s side, working with the US military would help ensure that initial community engagement by the military is carried out in a manner consistent with the NSP model, laying the foundation for future full-CDC treatment when security improves.

## THE PEOPLE'S DEVELOPMENT FUND: A CAPACITY-BUILDING COUNTERINSURGENCY PROGRAM THAT WORKS

Another program to build capacity in provincial and district governments was developed by the 173rd Airborne Brigade during its 2010 deployment to Lowgar and Wardak provinces, the People's Development Fund. This program was designed to prepare Afghan subnational governments for the time when ISAF forces leave and the Afghan central government and international donors take over responsibility for development.

The core principle behind the People's Development Fund is that governments do better at developing capacity when they have incentives to do so. The program was the mechanism the Lowgar and Wardak governors established to manage budget support-type development funds, including CERP funds, which US military commanders can use for reconstruction.

The People's Development Fund strengthens ties between people and their subnational governments by giving those governments financial resources and the freedom to select projects, and then holding them accountable to their citizens for delivery. By doing so, it also creates an exit strategy for counterinsurgency operations by building a system the government can manage and international donors can fund.

### *The People's Development Fund: What It Is ... and What It Is Not*

A People's Development Fund is a provincial-level construct set up to manage decentralized national government and donor resources.<sup>5</sup> The name derives from the Afghan Subnational Government Law's requirement that at least 25% of resources are to flow to provinces as a "people's budget." Provinces and districts were to manage the people's budget in the name of the people.

The program that eventually became the People's Development Fund started as the 173rd Airborne's Capacity Building Fund. The 173rd's approach to governance and development in its area of operations was designed to meet two critical goals: give local governments a reason to work and build systems that are sustainable and scalable. The core principle was that government performance improves when the incentives government officials face change.

The People's Development Fund gave block grants to provinces and districts that demonstrated they could meet simple standards of inclusion, accountability, transparency, and delivery. the focus on rewarding good behavior at the local government level is not unique to this program.

Under the People's Development Fund, provincial and district governments were given resources authorized at the brigade command level through CERP. They were free to use the resources as they saw fit, subject to three conditions: the project selection process was open and demonstrably representative of the people of each province and district, government representatives agreed to transparency, and projects did not violate CERP legal restrictions. In some districts, the process developed into much more than a vehicle for block grants from CERP. It proved to be a useful mechanism to help district governors sort out, rationalize, and coordinate the various development programs their districts receive.

Both the army and the local governments needed to unlearn much before new ways could be learned. For ten years, coalition forces and donor programs conditioned Afghan leaders that if they waited, the international community would do their work for them. As a result, Afghans don't believe the Afghan government is capable of or is responsible for improving their lives. The People's Development Fund turned this relationship on its head.

Transparency requirements meant that all citizens in Lowgar and Wardak knew about the program: what projects were selected, how the districts chose the projects, who was contracted to do the work and at what cost (and who was not selected), how the projects turned out, and who in the government was responsible—whom to call with complaints. To ensure that all districts faced the same incentives to build capacity, the 173rd launched the initial phase of People's Development Fund for Lowgar and Wardak with predetermined allocations for each district and province based on population estimates.

#### **Box 4.3 The People's Development Fund works**

The People's Development Fund was a pilot of a program designed to be long-term, and yet even in its short pilot phase, there were remarkable success stories, districts with leadership that understood the basic message that inclusion and openness are good for government and governance, and ran with it in ways we could not have scripted. Baraki Barak and Mohammed Agha in Lowgar are two such districts.

In Baraki Barak, Subgovernor Engineer Mohammad Rahim engaged not only the formal decision-making structure, the district development assembly, and the Afghan Social Outreach Program, but the district's informal power base as well, the shuras, and sensibly combined management of the People's Development Fund and the district delivery program in his district. After wide consultation, the district established a set of priority projects independent of who might fund them, and only then did it consider how to fund them. This is a great example of local needs, not a donor, driving development. Recognizing that the People's Development Fund resources were available immediately, while the timing of district delivery program funds remained uncertain, this highly representative process chose a district hospital as the first project. Rahim worked with the Ministry of Health provincial representative to obtain the ministry's commitment to cover recurrent costs, but also sought outside donor assistance to support the clinic's activities as a backup in case central government funds were not forthcoming. At all points in this process, Engineer Rahim announced the timing of the various People's Development Fund stages and the decisions taken on the local radio station to inform the people of Baraki Barak.

The story is similar in Mohammad Agha, although the outcome is quite different. Subgovernor Abdul Hamid had the district development council shura (some 45 people) and the district development assembly (16 people) return to their communities to seek advice on priority projects. This process produced 17 project proposals, one for each of Mohammad Agha's 17 subdistricts. Hamid then put all 17 proposals in a box and drew them out one at a time to establish the order in which they would be implemented. Six projects exhausted the first Mohammad Agha People's Development Fund allocation, leaving 11 for funding in later rounds. When asked why he did not push for larger district-level investments like Baraki Barak's hospital, Subgovernor Hamid said, "We already have a hospital, and in any case we are less than 30 kilometers from Kabul." Mohammad Agha's process for distributing People's Development Fund resources is not one donors would have likely endorsed, but it had the great advantage of establishing that resources would be allocated fairly and transparently. Had there been future resources, the people of Mohammad Agha would have known that their district government would manage their money fairly and transparently.



Insisting on process requirements for local governments but leaving them accountability for delivery is a far cry from the usual CERP incentive structure. The hardest part of People's Development Fund is leaving accountability with the government. Making a government accountable means giving it room to fail. The right to fail was as tough a concept for coalition forces as it has been for the international development community.

Some proposed project lists did not appear consistent with a consultative, representative process, and even where the selection process seemed legitimate, some proposed projects would not have been on a donor list of development priorities.

For example, Puli Alam district requested 500 serving plates. It is difficult to imagine how this could be a development priority, but it was. Without the plates, the district could not provide meals at shuras, a cultural tradition, and a necessary part of the functioning of local government (in the end, however, the request was refused on CERP legal grounds).

Most donors reject projects that do not meet their standards for good development activities. Under the People's Development Fund, unless projects violated CERP legal requirements, they were approved. Transparency generated the incentive for improving project selection by comparison with peers (fellow district governors), through both information sharing and peer pressure (Box 4.3).

To encourage better use of People's Development Fund resources, an information campaign as the first funding round ended aimed to inform province and district governments and the people of both provinces on how the districts had used their funds. People would judge for themselves if their provincial and district governments made good use of their funds relative to the way other districts spent those funds.

Also, the 173rd facilitated a shura (meeting) of district subgovernors to share experiences. This gathering of district governors provided a venue in which subgovernors could learn from each other and come up with suggestions for the brigade and its successor brigade on ways to improve the People's Development Fund. This meeting was an entirely Afghan meeting that gave district subgovernors a stake in the design process.

The program operated under predetermined rules—representative decision making and transparency—but provincial and district authorities met these requirements as they saw fit. For example, if a representative

district development assembly, district development council, or district shura had already established development priorities for the district, all that was needed was for the district subgovernor to confirm with those decision-making bodies that the projects chosen for funding were at the top of the priority list.

### *The Experience as of Late 2010*

The 173rd announced the first round of funding in June 2010. The 173rd ensured that projects complied with CERP legal requirements and transparency requirements. The People's Development Fund was a huge shift in the counterinsurgency business model and coalition force and government incentives, so it is not surprising that some districts adopted the program more quickly than others. Some districts implemented it better than we designed it. Some districts struggled with security problems or weak leadership while others sought out the program even with no coalition force presence in their districts (Box 4.4). Poor security impeded People's Development Fund implementation, but some districts saw it as worth fighting for (Box 4.5).

#### **Box 4.4 Demand even where coalition forces are not present**

Parts of the 173rd Airborne's area of operation were sufficiently secure that the brigade has no presence there. The Behsoods are a case in point. Located in the remote and difficult-to-access north-west corner of Wardak, the Behsoods are representative of a host of Afghan districts that pay a "stability penalty," getting little or no attention to development needs from the provincial government or coalition forces. At the first People's Development Fund training session organized by the 173rd, representatives from the Behsoods found a way to attend wholly on their own and asked how they could participate. Every district in Wardak was given an initial People's Development Fund budget, so their participation was not an issue. The challenge was to find ways to give the Behsoods the technical support needed to comply with the rules. One answer was for the coalition force to facilitate interaction between the Behsood authorities and those districts that led in People's Development Fund implementation, underwriting peer-to-peer learning.

**Box 4.5 Development as counterinsurgency**

Kherwar District is one of the districts with the most fighting in Lowgar Province. Consequently, it is deprived of almost all development assistance and support. In 2010, led by subgovernor Hamayoon, Kherwar pulled back from the edge. Citizens wanted their lives improved and stated in no uncertain terms that insurgents were not welcome in their province. People's Development Fund implementation in Kherwar reflects a district dominated by three tribes that do not always agree on what the district needs. Capacity is limited; mechanisms for consultation, nonexistent. To rectify this, subgovernor Hamayoon established a 36-member district community council (DCC) to begin establishing representative government.

Through the DCC, the subgovernor accepted a dozen small projects spread throughout the district as a means of signaling that the People's Development Fund served all people of the district. The DCC was eager to step up its role in resource management.

What did we learn? Most important, the process works (Box 4.3). It gave district leaders a reason to develop their solutions to both process and technical problems. It created a strong sense of ownership in provincial and district governments.

Governor Lodin of Lowgar stated that the People's Development Fund was the first time anyone had given him and his government colleagues both resources and the responsibility to deliver. In the past, non-government organizations and the coalition force had both the resources and the responsibilities.

A key challenge to the coalition's counterinsurgency efforts was how to operate in areas with no coalition force presence. These are often the more stable and more remote parts of Afghanistan. The People's Development Fund was designed to operate in all districts, regardless of coalition force presence. Working remote areas required ingenuity and creativity but was not impossible. The Behsoods (see Box 4.4) were a case in point.

Insecurity slowed the People's Development Fund process but did not stop it. In Kherwar District, Lowgar, the people realized that less insurgency means more development. Led by a new subgovernor and the incentives created by the program, the district presented a united front against the insurgents and implemented it (see Box 4.5).

One of the most critical assumptions underlying the People's Development Fund is that people and their representatives know what districts and provinces need and how to deliver on those needs better than donors know it. Even in this pilot stage, districts showed how important the concept of local solutions to local problems could be.

Districts generated very different project lists as they used the People's Development Fund to meet different objectives under different constraints and local situations. The process of project selection varied considerably among the 16 districts in the 2 provinces, with even the best subgovernors meeting participation and representation requirements in different ways. This variety in meeting the requirements of the program was all to the good. It may make donors nervous, but it was a sign of real ownership and approaches consistent with Afghan culture and capacity. Variety was one of the signals that the People's Development Fund process was working and made sense (Box 4.6).

#### **Box 4.6 Local solutions to local problems**

The People's Development Fund process was driven from the bottom up. Unlike many subnational development programs, in which Kabul determines what each district should have in the way of health, education, and other services, the program allowed local governments to use resources in ways best suited to individual district needs. The variability in project lists among the Lowgar and Wardak districts testified to the need for a connected, bottom-up approach to development. Some districts spent their allocation on a single project; others put forward more than a dozen. In each case, a little digging revealed the rationale behind the choices... and that rationale made sense seen through a stability lens. In Baraki Barak, a stable, relatively prosperous district, a representative decision-making process chose to allocate the entire People's Development fund budget to the district's highest service priority, a 20-bed health clinic, this even though the district development program was designed to provide just such a service. Why? Because Baraki Barak's district government did not want to wait on the district development program process to deliver and was not confident that it would. Through the People's Development Fund, the hospital might well be completed much sooner.

Lowgar's Khoshi District presents a sharp contrast to Baraki Barak. The district development council was very effective in

submitting small projects, 16 of them, but struggled to determine how to select larger, district-wide projects. A large number of small projects made sense in an unstable district with sharp tribal divisions. The district government used the first round to demonstrate to the dominant Tajik and Pashtun ethnic groups that there would be no favoritism in using People's Development Fund resources.

### *Early Lessons*

The People's Development Fund pilot taught us a great deal. Some of what we have learned confirmed what development specialists have long known, but seldom applied. Among the most important lessons are:

- Leadership matters. Although the People's Development Fund worked where subgovernors were weak or nonexistent, it worked best in districts with competent and engaged leadership.
- One size does not fit all. Local conditions dictated different approaches to development and the uses of development resources.
- Provinces and districts have weak capacity, but that is not the same thing as zero capacity. Given a chance, provincial and district governments were capable of making development happen.
- Ownership works best when donors set standards and local officials are allowed to find their ways of meeting these standards.
- Years of donor overload had drummed the idea of accountability out of the Afghan public system, but the 173rd Airborne program resurrected it. Indeed, the coalition must resurrect local accountability if the world is to achieve a stable Afghanistan.
- The best purveyors of technical assistance are Afghans themselves. Interaction among provincial and district leaders carries the greatest potential for learning, experience transfer, and capacity building.

The People's Development Fund was a learning experience for the governors and subgovernors of Lowgar and Wardak. The real payoff to the program should have come in second, third, and fourth funding rounds, and beyond—unfortunately, the later rounds did not happen. Transparency and information sharing will give the people of Lowgar and Wardak a reason to pay attention to their local governments' performance. If one district chose to spend its People's Development Fund allocation well and another spent it less well, people living in the second

district would begin to ask why. If a road project in one district cost twice what a similar road project in another district cost, people would demand to know why. The People's Development Fund continually reminded people and governments that they are in the development battle together. It was a capacity-building program with short-term payoffs that paved the way for longer-term development.

The People's Development Fund was also a learning experience for the coalition forces. It was a very different way of doing counterinsurgency business. And it included planning for continuity when ISAF left.

- The CERP block grants to provinces and districts simulated the people's budget component of the projected Subnational Government Law to build district and provincial capacities for project selection, management, and financial oversight.
- Building local capacity provided technical assistance on process, institutional, and technical/engineering aspects.
- A credible oversight mechanism monitored and evaluated performance by feeding an information campaign for people at every stage of the process.

Other programs attempted to address the lack of government capacity. The Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG), the Afghan government's agency for improving local governance, with the support of the ISAF Joint Command, undertook the district delivery program (DDP) in 80 key terrain districts across Afghanistan. The government tasked DDPs with delivering a package of basic services at the district level with the support of (1) earmarked USAID funds to pay approved civil servants, so that that district governors could fill their *tashkeels* (civil service rosters); (2) USAID programs to assist in meeting Afghanistan national development strategy goals in certain key sectors such as health and education; and (3) CERP funds to build key infrastructure. The DDP process was designed to be Afghan-led but did not meet that standard. It was a new government organization struggling to build its own capacity even as it tried to launch a complex and difficult program in 80 key terrain districts. As a consequence, the coalition force and US government resources implemented the early phases, which did little to convince citizens that their government is working and accountable.

## ANNEX: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR THE PEOPLE'S DEVELOPMENT FUND

This series of questions and answers was prepared as part of an effort to expand the reach of the People's Development Fund to other parts of Afghanistan. It tried to anticipate the questions that others in Afghanistan working on counterinsurgency issues might ask about the program.

1. *Why do we need a new fund?* There is as of now no vehicle through which provinces and districts can manage development resources. Without such a vehicle, governors and subgovernors will find it difficult to motivate their staff to develop decision-making and oversight capacity.
2. *Whose fund is it?* The People's Development Fund is the provincial government's fund. The provincial development committees (PDCs), district development assemblies (DDAs), and district shuras, under the guidance of provincial governors and district subgovernors, manage it. Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) councils provide oversight. The funds belong to the people of Lowgar and Wardak and are held in trust by the provincial governments.
3. *Where did the money supporting the People's Development Fund come from?* The initial grant will be through the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) in the form of an allocation to the province and each district based on population.
4. *What happens to the People's Development Fund when CERP funds stop?* The program is designed to attract donor assistance beyond CERP funds. One future model would be to follow the NSP example and have donors establish a trust fund that would be available to districts and provinces that established a People's Development Fund and demonstrated with CERP funds that they were capable of managing them openly, transparently, with low corruption, and with demonstrable outcomes. District Delivery Program funds would be allocated in conjunction with People's Development Fund funds to ensure maximum impact for both programs.
5. *Who decides how to spend the money?* DDAs or representative shuras where DDAs are not functioning will make decisions at the

district level, and PDCs at the province level. At the district level, ASOP councils will provide oversight. These decision-making and oversight bodies will be representative of the areas covered and be legitimate in the eyes of the people.

6. *How will representativeness and legitimacy of DDAs and PDCs be guaranteed?* There is no guarantee at the early stages of this process, but the program will put checks in place. The program will also disseminate the names of DDA, ASOP council, and PDC members widely under the banner, "Are you represented?"
7. *Who selects the contractors?* Provincial and district governments are responsible for selecting contractors. For small projects under \$5000, contractors may be selected directly. For larger contractors, an open process that ensures a competitive outcome will be used to attract qualified contractors and get the best price.
8. *How will people know which contractor was selected?* Once a district has selected a contractor, district and provincial governments will announce the contractor's name, contact information, the size of the contract, what the contractor will do, how many local and other workers the contractor will employ, what the payroll will be, and when the project will start and end. The information campaign will identify other qualified contractors who competed but did not get the contract.
9. *What about corruption?* The People's Development Fund will fight corruption by implementing the highest standards of transparency and openness, and by insisting on performance before payment. People will know what each contractor is to deliver in their district or community, who is to deliver it, how much it will cost, and when the contractor will deliver the project. Each district will provide telephone numbers for complaints or questions. Where National Solidarity Program community development committees (NSP CDCs) exist, the districts will bring them into the monitoring effort.
10. *How will all this openness and transparency be ensured?* The only condition for receiving contributions into the People's Development Fund other than a representative process for project selection is that districts disseminate each step of the process widely to the people. Provincial and district governments will use radio, the print media, bulletin boards in the market center, mosques, and CDCs to make sure people are aware of



the program. Regular assessments of the information people are receiving will also be carried out.

11. *How do we know if the People's Development Fund is working?* The ultimate measure of success for the People's Development Fund would have been increased stability in the region driven by strengthened ties between people and regional government. Other measures include:
  - a. Whether other donors participate (beyond CERP).
  - b. How many people participate in shuras.
  - c. How actively people and the CDCs engage in oversight and monitoring.
  - d. When districts that are falling behind seek help from those who lead the process.
  - e. How perceptions and stability associated with the People's Development Fund change. Outcomes of regular surveys, for example, the Army's TCAPF (Tactical Conflict Assessment and Planning Framework), will be used.
12. *What happens if a district or province performs poorly?* That depends on the reason for the poor performance. If districts are genuinely committed to the principles underlying the People's Development Fund but have exceptionally weak capacity, every effort will be made to increase that capacity through coalition forces technical support and later a mobile technical support team (see no. 13). If districts do not follow the required procedures or fail to meet the transparency standards, the project will give them lower funding in the future until they fix these shortcomings. District or provincial governments that do not deliver for reasons within their control risk having follow-on funding curtailed or cut off.
13. *Will districts and provinces receive technical support for the program?* An Afghan-staffed technical support team is being set up to help provinces and districts implement the People's Development Fund program. These teams, one each for Lowgar and Wardak, will have members whom the provinces permanently assign to districts, and a mobile team with special expertise in the key development and process areas. Technical support for this first round of funding will come from coalition forces as we build up local capacity in this area.
14. *Will every district get People's Development Fund funding?* Every district will receive an initial CERP allocation, but access to those

funds will depend on the district meeting the required representation and transparency measures.

15. *What about next year?* For districts and provinces that have been successful in following process and transparency measures, that have allocated their original budget, and whose projects are delivering, there will be a new CERP allocation to their People's Development Fund. Work is underway to ensure that when the current brigade leaves at the end of this year, the replacement brigade will continue the program. Efforts are also underway to attract other donors into the program.
16. *How does the People's Development Fund serve stability goals?* By giving people a say in how the government spends development funds, and the information they need to determine how effectively the district has spent those funds, the program shows people that they have a stake in the country's future and a reason to support stabilization efforts.
17. *Is the People's Development Fund consistent with current GoA programs and laws?* The 173rd designed the People's Development Fund with both the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) District Delivery Program and the new Subnational Government Law (SNGL) in mind. The People's Development Fund is an institutional structure at province and district levels designed to manage the resources that will flow when SNGL funding begins and to ensure coordination between SNGL funds and DDP resources.
18. *How is a People's Development Fund related to NSP?* In many respects, the People's Development Fund concept is NSP moved from communities to districts and provinces. It is not a substitute for NSP and its CDCs. The NSP would continue to provide support for community-level services, while the People's Development Fund would undertake larger investments that affect districts and provinces, rather than a single community. The NSP and the People's Development Fund would interact in another way, as CDC will be a part of the system for monitoring the People's Development Fund. As elected representatives, CDC members will be the conduit for information, complaints, and concerns regarding People's Development Fund projects and programs.

19. *What is the role of the media?* The Lowgar and Wardak media will play a critical role in informing citizens of People's Development Fund procedures and programs, and in ensuring that government statements about the program are accurate. Work is underway to develop a program to support Lowgar and Wardak media as they take on this role.

## NOTES

1. This chapter was originally written in November 2013 as "We Have Met the Enemy: What We've Done Wrong in Afghanistan and How to Fix It."
2. The COIN manual does mention that soldiers and marines are expected to be "nation builders," but the theme is never developed, nor is it in any way an element of the COIN approach.
3. <http://nationalpriorities.org/cost-of/>.
4. <http://www.costsofwar.org/>.
5. See the annex to this chapter for more detailed questions and answers on the PDF.



## Postscript, 2018: Why Counterinsurgency Is Still Flawed

**Abstract** Both Iraq and Afghanistan continue to suffer from domestic struggles for power. The conflicts represent a mix of civil war, where contenders with some legitimacy vie for power, and insurgency, where one side is preponderant and the other uses guerrilla tactics. When appropriate, outside counterinsurgency must focus on building local government capacity, even at the cost of some inefficiency in delivering services. Current US counterinsurgency strategy theoretically stresses linking people to their government but practically often substitutes for government by directly providing services. Both counterinsurgency strategies and international development strategies need to refocus on local legitimacy and engage local governments, near the people, as their best opportunity.

**Keywords** Counterinsurgency · Civil war · Development · Iraq  
Afghanistan

In 2018, it's six to eight years after most of the experiences reported here. How well do my ideas on counterinsurgency hold up? How might the counterinsurgency manual change? What lessons should international development agencies take away for their own work?

Neither Iraq nor Afghanistan turned out the way we would have wished, or the way their long-suffering people would have wished. In both countries, we face a fundamental puzzle. If those leading the

efforts, at least on the military side, understood their mission and had a blueprint for achieving it—after all, David Petraeus was one of two principal authors for the army’s counterinsurgency manual—why did things go so wrong?

Why did those in the know not implement the strategy that they had developed? The answer lies in the incentives that government agencies and Congress face today much as it did during the Vietnam War (McMaster 1997). And in the military’s position as a political institution just as much as the State Department.

### WHY DID WE GO TO WAR IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN?

Although the efficacy of our war in Iraq and Afghanistan is not central to this book, it is worth a moment of reflection. I was a graduate student in the University of Chicago economics department toward the end of the Vietnam War (1971). In the debate over the prospect of an all-volunteer army, the professors in that department, the economics profession’s bastion of market-oriented solutions and freedom of choice, favored an all-volunteer force.

However, my mentor and thesis advisor Theodore W. Schultz, later a Nobel prizewinner in economics, expressed a concern that an all-volunteer force would be an army of the underprivileged. In his mind, only those with no alternative would choose to join the military.

That turned out to be a dramatically wrong prediction. The US professional military is exactly that: professional and military. The people I was privileged to work with during my time in Iraq and Afghanistan were among the brightest and most creative people I have worked with, including those at the Rand Corporation and the World Bank.

But none of my colleagues mentioned during the debate what has turned out in my view to be the real downside: in a rich country, an all-volunteer force makes going to war almost costless for most Americans. When the United States finances wars through borrowed money and deficit spending, taxes don’t go up. And for most people, it’s not my son or daughter who is at risk, or anyone I know, or me. According to Karl Eikenberry and David Kennedy (2013), only one-half of 1% of the US population serves in the military, and of those 80% come from military families.

Why not another war if I face no financial burden and none of my loved ones or friends are at risk? It is impossible to prove, but I would

bet a great deal that if we still had a draft, we would not have gone to war in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

When we went to war, why did we do such a bad job? The answer lies in two areas: the funding incentives that US government agencies face; and the extraordinary risk aversion, impatience, and arrogance of the US political process.

On funding incentives, any US government agency that didn't want to see its budget cut had to be fully committed to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. US policymakers did not consider the inability of either Iraq or Afghanistan to absorb the resources the coalition threw at them. The international development community faces the same incentive in weak and fragile states: to ensure future funding, a program needs to be a player.

Even after committing to Iraq and Afghanistan, many US politicians knew that the risks of failure were very high. They answered by throwing more and more troops and money at both countries to show, if they did fail, that we had done everything humanly possible.

### HAS MY MIND CHANGED?

Have subsequent events changed my mind as to the lessons I took from my experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan? I don't yet have a satisfactory answer.

This question is not whether we *should* have engaged in either war, but whether had we fought these wars and managed the "peace" afterward differently, would the countries be in a better place today. To this question, I remain convinced the answer is yes, the broad lessons remain intact, despite global changes since these wars ended and the drawdown of coalition forces.

### UPDATE: AFGHANISTAN

While daily news reports are frightening, a recent World Bank report paints a hopeful if worrisome picture of a country on the mend. Economic management is much improved, tax collection is up, and expenditures are under control (Joya 2016). On these governance fronts, President Ashraf Ghani, an ex-World Banker, is doing a yeoman's job.

But the security situation looks bleak. As a recent commentary noted, "On January 10, the Taliban—which currently controls more territory

in the country than at any time since 2001—conducted three bombings in three major Afghan cities,” suggesting difficult times ahead (Soufan Group 2017).

Further, a recent *New York Times* report points out that fighting among warlords is almost as serious a problem for Afghan security as are the Taliban (Nordland 2017). And with competition increased among Afghanistan’s ethnic groups and power holders, the prospects for another meltdown appear worrisomely high (O’Connell 2017).

### UPDATE: IRAQ

The outlook for Iraq is in many ways worse than for Afghanistan. As the World Bank states (2016), “The Iraqi economic outlook is highly uncertain as military attacks by ISIS have undermined confidence, while the fall in oil prices saps the economy, government finances, and the external position.” The Bank thinks the economy will improve in the future, but the economic hit to Iraq and Iraqis is difficult to overstate. And, as if ISIS were not enough, Baghdad is engaged in a civil war with its Kurdish minority following that group’s vote for independence (Zuchino 2017).

So, neither Afghanistan nor Iraq is yet stable or on a steady development path. At a minimum, the evidence supports my view that the United States and the world need to rethink their approach to both counterinsurgency and state-building in fragile states. And the question arises: are the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan still counterinsurgencies, or are they, in fact, civil wars? If civil wars, what can outsiders do?

### INSURGENCIES VERSUS CIVIL WARS

In the academic and military literature, no clear line divides an insurgency and a civil war. The main difference appears to be tactical: insurgents tend to resort to guerrilla tactics; countries fight civil wars along more conventional lines.

Of the three—Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan—the Vietnam War blurs the distinction the most. It began with two governments fighting for control of the country using conventional military tactics, clearly a civil war. But it morphed into an insurgency when the United States entered the war, tilting the pure military balance toward the South and almost forcing the North to resort to guerrilla tactics.

Both Iraq and Afghanistan now represent a mix of civil war and insurgency. Civil war, as multiple groups with varying degrees of legitimacy vie for control of the country. Yet insurgency, because given the imbalance in conventional forces, the tactics are frequently those of an insurgency. In Iraq, a classic civil war is developing. In Afghanistan, the Karzai government was not seen as legitimate by many Afghans. In both countries, the prospect for extended unrest is high.

Vietnam showed that outsiders should be extremely cautious before participating in a civil war. Vietnam also taught us that outsiders could change the nature of a conflict, turning what is at its root a civil war into an insurgency. The civil war–insurgency distinction is not just semantic: if a domestic struggle for power underlies a conflict, it is unclear how external force could resolve it.

A domestic struggle for power may well characterize both Iraq and Afghanistan. If they are civil wars, picking sides risks high cost and humiliation. Already in 2007, a Pentagon report on Iraq said, “Some elements of the situation in Iraq are properly descriptive of a ‘civil war,’ including the hardening of ethno-sectarian identities and mobilization, the changing character of the violence, and population displacements” (US Department of Defense 2007; *Washington Post* 2007). In 2011, the *Guardian* reported on Afghanistan, “A British government review of the Afghan conflict is to warn that there are ‘significant risks’ of civil war or a Taliban takeover of the south and east of the country after NATO withdraws its combat troops at the end of 2014” (*Guardian* 2011).

But another definition distinguishes civil war as a conflict between roughly equal sides from insurgency as a conflict where government power is preponderant over the insurgents (Laiveling 2017). It is not at all clear which Afghanistan currently faces, though there appears to be a balance of power between the Taliban and Kabul and a desire on both parties to control the country.

Why does any of this matter? Because it suggests that outsiders cannot win a civil war by following counterinsurgency policies. Indeed, it is not clear that outsiders can be involved in a civil war without tipping a country into an insurgency. Since civil wars are, almost by definition, fought between two claimants of legitimacy, the logic underlying the counterinsurgency agenda—linking people to their legitimate government—cannot hold.



## 2018 LESSONS

With hindsight, I would draw six lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan and my work in fragile states:

- The international community has to be clear about its mission: is it to create stability by building national capacity? Or is it to make citizens' lives better as quickly as possible? The trade-off is harsh, and any program will have to do some of both. But I remain convinced that to build government capacity in counterinsurgencies and fragile states, a subnational government program like the People's Development Fund remains the way to go. To succeed, it has to be done right, with small money, local responsibility, local accountability, and great transparency.
- More money is not the answer—it may well be the problem. A program offering smaller amounts of money, generating less rent-seeking, can more easily incentivize actors and protect resources. Donors and the international community can put small amounts of money at risk to give national governments a sense of ownership and accountability.
- Donors need to develop mechanisms for working with local governments. They are the face of government for most citizens, and they can be more easily incentivized than national governments. But donors need to accept the risks that go with such an approach, including weak and uneven implementation.
- Donors need to take risks and accept failure. Otherwise, they, not local authorities, will be responsible for both successes and failures, leading inevitably to aid dependence. Accepting failure does not mean turning a blind eye to incompetence or corruption. As in Silicon Valley, it is smart failure that is acceptable—a failure that moves one up the knowledge and success curve.
- Both the military and the governance elements of counterinsurgency require continuity above all else—incoming commanders must build on what their predecessors started. And counterinsurgency needs better mechanisms to measure and spread successful approaches throughout military areas of operation. International development requires continuity, too, to pursue long-term capacity building.

- Fighting operations, though important, are not the key to successful counterinsurgency. Ironically, many senior military officers recognize this (going back to Galula 1964), but few civilians do.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNTERINSURGENCY MANUAL

As good as the counterinsurgency manual by David Petraeus and James Amos is, it remains a “how to do” rather than a “how to support” document (US Army and US Marine Corps 2007). This emphasis and the military’s “can do” ethos led to a predictable situation in Iraq and Afghanistan: a foreign presence that overwhelmed local capacity and took over.

Many pages in the manual detail what US forces need to know to do the work of the host nation government effectively in a highly foreign environment. The 173rd Airborne approach built on the assumption that Afghans knew far better than we ever could what their people wanted and how to deliver it.

The counterinsurgency manual recognizes the principal objective of a counterinsurgency campaign: to link people to their government. But it then falls back on how to train and organize the military so they can do what the host nation government should do. Quotations from the manual show its support for the principal objective (Box 5.1). But the manual’s very length—282 pages—shows its willingness to have the military provide host nation government services.

### **Box 5.1 Quotations from the counterinsurgency manual that support the primary objective of counterinsurgency—linking people to their government**

[Soldiers and Marines] must be able to facilitate establishing local governance and the rule of law. Foreword.

Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies; each side aims to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate. Para 1-3.

Long-term success in COIN depends on the people taking charge of their affairs and consenting to the government’s rule. Para 1-4.

The long-term objective for all sides remains acceptance of the legitimacy of one side’s claim to political power by the people of the state or region. Para 1-7.

Success requires the government to be accepted as legitimate by most of that uncommitted middle, which also includes passive supporters of both sides. Para 1-108.

The primary objective of any COIN operation is to foster development of effective governance by a legitimate government. Para 1-113.

In western liberal tradition, a government that derives its just powers from the people and responds to their desires while looking out for their welfare is accepted as legitimate. Para 1-114.

Military action can address the symptoms of a loss of legitimacy. In some cases, it can eliminate substantial numbers of insurgents. However, success in the form of a durable peace requires restoring legitimacy, which, in turn, requires the use of all instruments of national power. A COIN effort cannot achieve lasting success without the Host Nation (HN) government achieving legitimacy. Para 1-120.

US forces committed to a COIN effort are there to assist a HN government. The long-term goal is to leave a government able to stand by itself. In the end, the host nation has to win on its own. Achieving this requires development of viable local leaders and institutions. US forces and agencies can help, but HN elements must accept responsibilities to achieve a real victory. While it may be easier for US military units to conduct operations themselves, it is better to work to strengthen local forces and institutions and then assist them. HN governments have the final responsibility to solve their own problems. Eventually all foreign armies are seen as interlopers or occupiers; the sooner the main effort can transition to HN institutions, without unacceptable degradation, the better. Para 1-147.

Successful counterinsurgents support or develop local institutions with legitimacy and the ability to provide basic services, economic opportunity, public order, and security. Para 5.1.

The focus of COIN operations generally progresses through three indistinct stages that can be envisioned with a medical analogy (Para 5-3):

- Stop the bleeding.
- Inpatient care—recovery.
- Outpatient care—movement to self-sufficiency.

*Source* US Army and US Marine Corps (2006).

The manual also recognizes the special nature of insurgencies: “An insurgency is typically a form of internal war, one that occurs primarily within a state, not between states, and one that contains at least some elements of civil war” (Para 1-2). “Joint doctrine defines an insurgency as an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict (JP 1-02)” (Para 1-1).

As the 173rd Airborne Brigade’s approach to counterinsurgency did, the manual recognizes the critical role of information and transparency: “The information environment is a critical dimension of such internal wars, and insurgents attempt to shape it to their advantage” (Para 1-3).

And the manual recognizes many times that kinetic (fighting) operations alone cannot win a counterinsurgency war: “However, killing every insurgent is normally impossible. Attempting to do so can also be counterproductive in some cases; it risks generating popular resentment, creating martyrs that motivate recruits, and producing cycles of revenge” (Para 1-23).

The delicate balance that the military has to achieve in implementing counterinsurgency has long been recognized, as the manual acknowledges:

General Creighton Abrams, the US commander in Vietnam in 1971, recognized this fact when he said, “There’s very clear evidence...in some things, that we helped too much. And we *retarded* the Vietnamese by doing it.... *We* can’t run this thing.... *They’ve* got to run it. The nearer we get to that the better off *they* are and the better off *we* are.” Much earlier, T.E. Lawrence made a similar observation while leading the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1917: “Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them” (Para 1-28).

The manual also acknowledges the balancing act the military must perform:

David Galula wisely notes, “To confine soldiers to purely military functions while urgent and vital tasks need to be done, and nobody else is available to undertake them, would be senseless. The soldier must then be prepared to become...a social worker, a civil engineer, a schoolteacher, a nurse, a boy scout. But only for as long as he cannot be replaced, for it is better to

entrust civilian tasks to civilians” (Galula 1964). Galula’s last sentence is important. “Military forces can perform civilian tasks but often not as well as the civilian agencies with people trained in those skills” (Para 2-9).

Another Galula insight, which Kaplan cites as influencing Petraeus, was, “To Galula, the essence of this kind of warfare [an insurgency] wasn’t so much the clash of arms (although arms were certainly involved). It was rather a competition for the loyalty, or at least complicity, of the local population” (Kaplan 2014).

In summary, the Petraeus and Amos counterinsurgency manual gets the objective right but then strays back into conventional instruments, even while pointing out the danger of using them. The manual warns of the dangers of doing too much but does not provide sufficiently clear guidelines on how to get a foothold on the slippery slope that both Abrams and Lawrence recognize. Galula is right in principle: the non-fighting counterinsurgency activities need to be demilitarized as soon as possible. But in practice, the civilian side in both Iraq and Afghanistan was not up to the task.

Rufus Phillips’s discussion of Vietnam outlines an attempt to solve the civilian side of the equation (Phillips 2008). But results suggest it offered too little too late. Phillips also points out the importance of understanding both the enemy and ourselves. In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, the enemies were rural-based insurgents for whom time and lives did not matter. The US side was not rural-based, and for it time and lives did matter.

All this suggests that the counterinsurgency manual is flawed in both design and implementation. In design, because it advocates an approach that will inevitably have the United States taking over both military and governance functions from the host nation government. In implementation, because the counterinsurgency manual’s warnings about impatience and arrogance, and about the military’s need for an effective civilian counterpart went unheeded in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN, AND NOW ISIS

What should we be doing in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria today, regardless of the military’s disregard for 173rd Airborne’s approach? I am quite sure that increased military interventions will not work any better than they did in the past.

Outsiders cannot make a country if the indigenous population is not interested in being a single country. Both Iraq and Afghanistan face this possibility, with generations of history supporting it.

The Afghan National Solidarity Program (NSP) remains active despite the security situation. A 2015 “gold standard” assessment, based on a randomized controlled trial across 500 villages, found mixed success (Beath and Fontini 2015). One finding attributed some weaknesses to the NSP’s status as a Kabul- and donor-driven initiative. Perhaps inadvertently, the program imposed western standards on Afghan communities, such as a requirement for substantial female representation in the community councils. The requirement, though possibly beneficial in the long run for Afghanistan, did not represent the desires of local Afghan communities—it was a direct affront to the division of responsibilities in traditional Afghan societies, much less Islam. The assessment also supported a key premise of the People’s Development Fund program: when community organizations had nothing to manage, they quickly reverted to old habits. A suitably modified NSP could be useful in efforts to stabilize Afghanistan even now, the findings suggest.

As for ISIS, the West’s ongoing struggle needs to be seen as a counterinsurgency war that occasionally slips into conventional warfare, as in the battle for Mosul. Military might alone is unlikely to win. Certainly, drone attacks that kill civilians along with the enemy will not do the trick, nor will enflaming hatred for Muslims (exactly what ISIS wants). As I wrote in 2016, in response to an article on welcoming Syrian refugees to Canada (de Tray 2016),

Your article on Canada’s welcoming of Syrian refugees is far more important than many readers may realize.

Let’s start with two often overlooked propositions. First, ISIS’s main aim is to have the West hate Muslims (which is why Donald Trump is the best thing that ever happened to ISIS [Khan 2017]); second, counterinsurgent wars, of which ISIS is one, are never won by military might (look at Iraq and Afghanistan, and Vietnam before them).

Canada’s people-to-people program is a great step in the right direction: Showing understanding and kindness—assimilating rather than isolating Muslim refugees—is the way to defeat ISIS.

But, Canada, be forewarned: Your kindness toward Syrian refugees will not protect you from future terrorist acts. Indeed, you may be explicitly targeted to discourage other western countries from following in your footsteps. If this happens, don't misread the signals. Yours is the right anti-ISIS strategy. Please stay with it.

Working with the Muslim community, rather than treating them all as enemies, does not mean that the west can drop its guard against terrorism and terrorist attacks. As history has too often demonstrated, radical Islam is happy to kill its own to further its objectives.

But to make this a Christian versus Muslim war is what ISIS wants. The west should make ISIS a Muslim problem. The way is to engage with the vast majority of decent sensible Muslims, not treating them all as if they were potential suicide-vest wearing terrorists. We have to work hard not to penalize the good folks because there is some chance that they may be bad people.

With ISIS's defeat in Mosul, we should ask, "Why did ISIS choose to fight a conventional war?" I guess that they will not make that mistake again. Defeat in Mosul and perhaps Tal Afar will drive ISIS back to traditional insurgency tactics.

As in any counterinsurgency war, it can be difficult-to-impossible to separate the enemy from friends. In Afghanistan outside Kabul, most Afghans did not know who the Taliban in their locality were. So, going forward does not mean managing the process and arming some Muslims against others, but taking a supporting role, just as the international development community should do in fragile states.

#### INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORK IN FRAGILE STATES: MANY OF THE SAME PROBLEMS AS IN COUNTERINSURGENCY

Given my background, I saw the counterinsurgency work in Iraq and Afghanistan through a development economist's eyes. As my time with the military wore on, especially in Afghanistan, I saw more and more similarities between mistakes the coalition was making and the mistakes I'd seen the international community make in fragile states. My experience in East Timor, in particular, allows me to draw parallels.

Getting fledgling governments to deliver today or to be seen to be delivering today—rather than a decade from now—is a capacity issue. But donors may not focus on it and often act as if the institutions of state

can be built quickly and from the outside. Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock (2004) call this assumption the Denmark syndrome. Denmark is shorthand for a development nirvana whereby the transfer of developed country (“Denmark”) institutions to underdeveloped countries magically transforms them into developed countries. However, nearly 70 years of international development experience makes it painfully clear that western institutions do not prosper in non-western settings.

It is long past time to take off the blinders of conventional thinking and consider alternatives for dealing with counterinsurgencies or fragile states. Why did my counterinsurgency efforts fail? Looking back from 2018, my best guess is that it was two things: my inability to find a non-military US government champion for the People’s Development Fund, and the ten-one-year war phenomenon—meaning that annual changes of military personnel led to the same war being fought ten times, rather than one war being cumulatively fought just once. Consequently, both the military and the nonmilitary roads to progress were blocked.

Future counterinsurgency wars must not be left entirely to the military. The United States needs to rethink the civilian side of a counterinsurgency effort, especially to build the equivalent of a civilian reserve force of carefully selected and trained people willing to help design and then take over programs the military started. To undertake this, communications between military and civilian “forces” would need massive improvement, and the 3 Ds—defense, diplomacy, and development—would need far better-balanced emphasis.



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