

AFGHANISTAN

Context and What's Next

In my view, there are situations in the world that the United States cannot resolve militarily. Vietnam was one of them. Iraq is another. Neither war was ours to win and both were theirs to lose. We always have been very poor at making distinctions between military and political victories and losses, and prone to supporting the losing side on civil wars—except for our own.

Throughout the 2003 campaign to oust Saddam Hussein and the subsequent insurgencies, and even more so with the ongoing 2001 Afghanistan campaign, I have worried about whether we choose the right wars, enter them fully understanding why, and prosecute them in ways that will satisfy our objectives. Do these wars truly reflect our national interest? Do the locals support our actions? Do we understand the culture of these countries sufficiently to sense when we have worn out our welcome? Have we considered whether our intervention is a long-term positive for the United States and for stability in the region in

our absence? I have no boots-on-the-ground experience in either country, do not speak the languages, and, most importantly, do not understand the Arab, Kurdish, and Persian cultures and their nuances, or the relationships among the peoples and their tribes.

However, my boots have been on the ground since first enlisting as a Navy Seaman in World War II and subsequently leading infantry combat units in Korea and Vietnam and later commanding at division and corps with final assignment as commander in chief of U.S. Readiness Command in 1981. We need to husband the valor and dedication of our volunteer force and make certain our leaders do not turn to them for quick solutions by applying force to international problems that are better left to political resolution—such as Afghanistan/Pakistan.

Through a social network comprised of senior-level defense, military, and intelligence professionals, I was introduced to an individual with 30 years of in-theater experience and

By VOLNEY F. WARNER



U.S. Army (Tia P. Sokimson)

Soldier provides security from tower at Forward Operating Base Lane, Zabul Province

familiarity with the languages and cultures of Afghanistan. He has an extensive background in the Intelligence Community, Department of Defense, and the defense industry.

As one who believes in preemptive peace more than preemptive war, I have over the past months peppered him with questions that would enable me to better comprehend the nuances of the war in Afghanistan. Do we have a clear understanding of what “winning” means? What does it mean to the region? What does it mean to the Afghan people? What would be the consequences of negotiating a political settlement enforceable by the region’s interested powers?

With this subject matter expert’s permission, I have transcribed our question-and-answer dialogue and agreed to withhold his name, position, and organizational affiliation. The subject of this interview is presently active in actions that are politically, militarily, diplomatically, and operationally sensitive and therefore, for the purpose of this interview, I refer to him simply as “C.”

General Warner: You have over the past 30 years acquired convictions regarding our strategic interests in Afghanistan and how the Afghans regard us after almost 8 years of this latest conflict. Please share some of your insights.

C: Thanks for this opportunity. I am very appreciative because this Afghan/Pakistan business troubles me deeply, as does the burgeoning body of experts who pontificate about Afghanistan without complete appreciation for the Afghan culture or even a cursory understanding of the highly nuanced Pashto or Dari languages.

Afghanistan is a country in the sense of real estate, but it is not a nation and has rarely been one except under a few periods of autocratic rule that extended out of Kabul a few hundred kilometers. With the cultural makeup of families and tribes driving any sense of cohesiveness from the bottom up, it is not likely to ever be a Westphalian nation-state, perhaps contrary to the imaginings of absentee academicians and wishful politicians. Many on the ground here have come to realize that.

The last thing that the United States needs is to be sold into continuing an

General Volney F. Warner, USA (Ret.), was Commander, U.S. Readiness Command, from 1979 to 1981.

unwinnable war in a non-nation against a religious confederation that belongs to no nation and is very adept at strengthening its ranks by playing the anti-Westerner theme. George Santayana’s observation that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” applies to Iraq, but even more so to Afghanistan and western Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas [FATA]. The Afghanistan-Pakistan region plagues the world like King Tut’s curse—except in this case, it has repeatedly proven true.

General Warner: What about the Afghan people? What do they think? You seem to have captured a comprehensive understanding of their culture.

C: There is a huge difference between what we *think* we see through Western eyes and the reality of the Afghan culture. Even more today than a mere 2 years ago, I hear anti-West cries across Afghanistan and throughout the FATA and northern Pakistan. The Afghans are beginning to liken U.S. occupation to that of the Soviets—not in our

close quickly and in a manner that gives some hope of future stability without further alienating the Afghans.

Over these many years, I have come to care for the Afghan people, their way of life, and their compelling desire to be left alone to their form of civilization. I appreciate how they settle disagreements and how personal rights and wrongs from many generations ago have colored their outlook today. Whether they are termed tribal leaders or “warlords,” the government they gave is largely the government they know and want. This is a point that those who attempt to judge without understanding the culture mostly miss. It is akin to the facile view of too many academics prone to believe that Afghanistan is a conventional nation-state. It is not!

Some of us who have lived with the Afghans know it only qualifies as a *country*, defined as a parcel of real estate with people. These are people who have little desire for social or economic intercourse with strangers because history has convinced them that such interchanges only benefit the stranger. Occasional travelers bemoan the lack of improved roads and imagine that a COIN priority is

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practices, but simply in our presence. They are quite willing to accept the Taliban as a political party, despite the strictures of Wahhabi Islamic fundamentalism, if that is the price of everyday security.

A point that evades the COIN [counter-insurgency] aficionados and the neophytes in the new U.S. administration is that we do not have an insurgency in Afghanistan; rather, it is a civil war. The Afghan-Pashto tribes cannot be separated from those in the FATA, but the United States continues to believe the Afghanistan/Pakistan border is inviolate—not militarily, but politically. The posturing by the Marine Corps commandant and the MARSOC [U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command] commander is reminiscent of the goat rope that doomed Iranian hostage rescue Operation *Eagle Claw* because all Services claimed a piece of the action. And “policy foundations” fan the flames of continued involvement, not for reason of national objectives but to perpetuate their COIN cause. We need to bring our Afghan enterprise to a

to build them—a thought I have ruminated over a number of times when in the more desolate parts of the country. Consider that there are no roads because the Afghans are a private people and do not want to share land or be imposed upon to offer Islamic hospitality to strangers. What would visitors bring besides disruption to a lifestyle practiced over thousands of generations? History confirms this. This critical point about privacy and the Afghans is one that author Stephen Tanner continually makes in his excellent history of Afghanistan.

General Warner: What are your thoughts about the Afghanistan/Pakistan relationship?

C: How do we get the point across to the American leadership that the problem is not so much Afghanistan as it is the fragility and corruptness of Pakistan and the failure to clean up the FATA? I see this error multiplying as we ratchet up the resentment

of the Afghans by moving in more troops and limiting indigenous control over their own destinies. I am comforted to see these concerns echoed by members of the U.S.-led alliance.

There are no “maybes” about the Pakistanis. The training grounds for what became the Taliban are the madrassas, Pakistani schools funded by the Saudis in the 1980s that continue today. In earlier times, commencing with the 11th century, the madrassas taught subjects both religious and secular including law and medicine. This emphasis shifted in the 1980s to religion, notably political Islam.

Too many in the United States cannot—or do not want to—distinguish between al Qaeda and the Taliban because an enemy, any enemy, is good for business and provides fodder for Washington advisory organizations who thrive on strategic challenges and joint, interagency operations for their continued relevance and existence.

General Warner: What are your views on the U.S. and coalition strategy for waging the global war on terror in the Middle East and South Asia?

C: That is too broad a question to cover in summary fashion. I have to go back to events after 9/11 to answer, if there *is* an answer.

In Afghanistan in March-April 2002, we were detoured from the original objective declared by the President of punishing the 9/11 terrorists and defusing recurrence by destroying their organization. We exploited the public's 9/11 outrage and fears to pursue other political agendas that enveloped counterinsurgency, asymmetric warfare, WMD [weapons of mass destruction] proliferation, and the overthrow of selected dictatorships—all under the rubric of a “war on terror.” Our politicians morphed the pursuit of Osama bin Laden into this war, and we included the Taliban in our definition of enemies.

In Afghanistan, the impact of this agenda resulted in (1) not augmenting the few troops and paramils [paramilitary forces] that we had in-country to finish off the militant elements of the Taliban and (2) letting Pakistan seemingly off the hook by not pursuing the al Qaeda/bin Laden organization into the northern FATA. According to the President, we had other, more important, fish to fry in Iraq.

I will not go into the “why” of Iraq beyond saying—as one within the Intelligence Community—I was convinced, and remain so, that Saddam's WMD program, both research and manufacturing, were dead-ended within 2 years following *Desert Storm*.

When the administration again was compelled to pay attention to Afghanistan because the Taliban had recaptured much of the territory that we had chased them from, the objective had morphed from defeating the menaces of militant Islam of the Taliban and al Qaeda to a nationbuilding odyssey for the United States. It has escaped and continues to escape the idealists and the new COIN practitioners who are eager to prove their convictions that Afghanistan has only exhibited the characteristics of a nation when it was under autocratic rule. At all other times, the tribes lived their own lives; plied their trades; swapped foodstuffs, raw materials, and products; and made some AFAs [*afghanis*, the unit of currency] off of tourists. This is their way of life, even with the Taliban present in some of the provinces.

General Warner: We seem to be experiencing difficulty in identifying sufficient Afghan security folks to augment U.S. forces now in country. Additional U.S. interagency representatives are sorely needed to “embed”

Going into Iraq was a terrible miscalculation; Iraq is not a national entity, but another Yugoslavia cobbled together as a quick and dirty solution by Western interests—and it will balkanize after we leave.

We continuously fail to realize that combating terrorism requires reacting to our enemies in terms they can understand and fear. Appeasement is the path of least resistance for those with weak minds and base incentives. These behaviors devolve rapidly to the fundamental war equation of win or lose. The Soviets had the right solution to terrorism when four of their diplomats were kidnapped in Lebanon by Hizballah 23 years ago. The KGB kidnapped six fundamentalists and sliced off a few fingers, sending the severed digits to the fundamentalist leadership with the message “release our people or you'll get yours back piece-by-piece and more to follow.”

In the early 1970s, when terrorists attempted to skyjack a Royal Ethiopian Airlines flight, they were overcome by the flight crew and first-class passengers. They were moved to tourist class, and the skyjackers were beheaded. The crew radioed Addis Ababa to call the world press, and upon landing the pilot walked out with the heads of the terrorists and kicked them down the stair ramp, saying, “This is how we handle terrorists.”

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governance at the provincial level, if security eventually permits. Do you subscribe to the COIN population-centric approach in the current situation in Afghanistan?

C: Let me digress a moment to welcome you to the wonderful new world of population-centric COIN—the “feed your enemy and kiss his kids and he'll be yours for life” strategy. I was in and out of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1984, I have many mujahideen friends to this day among those who did not go to the madrassas and turn Taliban, and I have spent the lion's share of time since in mid- and Southwest Asia—Syria, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, and Afghanistan/Pakistan. I reject COIN as a workable solution over the long run unless the United States wants to rent Arabs and Pashtun for the foreseeable future. I say “rent” because we cannot buy them.

General Warner: But then why did we not eliminate the Taliban and pursue bin Laden and company into Pakistan when we had the chance?

C: The U.S. Government's paramils and special ops [special operations] folks, with the paid assistance of the Northern Alliance leaders, nearly cleaned out the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2002, then we turned the mop-up over to the organized military, tasking them to build an Afghan National Army [ANA]. But you need a nation to have a national army, and this nation only existed in Kabul and immediate environs. Nonetheless, BG McChrystal [Brigadier General Stanley McChrystal, USA] did yeoman's work until his forces were pulled out for Iraq on that ill-conceived and unplanned venture. I am a firm believer

in counterterrorism warfare up-close, personal, and quietly.

One can assign many reasons to why the Afghan Taliban was not eliminated in 2002, most of which had to do with American politics and shifting of the “strategic threat vision” to Iraq, the line-walking of Pakistani President [Pervez] Musharraf who sheltered them in the FATA, and the myopic way we left in 1992 with no view of, nor concern for, Afghanistan’s future. My personal knowledge begins in 1979 when only CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], not just surrogates, U.S. SOF [special operations forces], and USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] were on the scene. Many of the mujahideen became fast friends, particularly those of the Northern Alliance. Those who did not attend the madrassas and become Taliban have similarly remained friends over the years. I have mourned the loss of many of these friends. In 2001–2002, we warmly welcomed the U.S. special operations forces, wishing that they had been with us during the previous 20 years.

General Warner: Can you give us a historical context that will let us better understand the motivation and loyalties of the Afghan people?

C: The tribes were very loosely united in 1747 under Ahmad Shah Durrani and thereafter served as a buffer zone between British and Russian interests, until the Brits relinquished notional control in 1919. A military coup in 1973 ended a very brief period of some democracy. The coup was overthrown by the Soviets in 1979, and they, in turn, were evicted in 1989 by the Afghan mujahideen supported by the United States and some

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Pakistan Pashtun. When the United States precipitously withdrew support following the departure of the Soviets, many of the mujahideen, now unemployed, unsheltered, and unfed in a decimated country, attended camps and schools financed by the Saudi Wahhabis and operated by the Pakistanis under the strictures of the militant Taliban to obtain shelter and food for their families and themselves.

Keep these demographics in mind: the 39 million Afghans have a median age of under 18; 44 percent are under 15, and 53

percent are 15 to 64; less than 25 percent live in cities, the rest in scattered tribal settlements; and fewer than 28 percent of the population can read and write. The infant mortality rate is the third highest in the world at 152 per 1,000—so high, in fact, that many Afghans do not give names to their children until age 5. Life expectancy is under 45 years old. And beneath Afghan ethnic divisions—42 percent Pashtuns, 27 percent Tajiks, 10 percent Hazaras, and minority Uzbeks, Turkmen, Baluchi, and Nuristanis—are the loyalty hierarchies commencing with family, clan, village, tribe, and, at the bottom of the list, national identity as citizens of Afghanistan.

General Warner: Why do you contend Afghanistan is a country but not a nation?

C: First, because of the social hierarchy that I have just noted and particularly the ordering of it with the national identity being least important. We are not dealing with a nation that has—as much as we would like to believe—an effective government. The Afghan government is in evidence only in Kabul, and elsewhere only on police and military paydays. It is more a license for



Afghan boy watches Marines patrol in Madrassa area of Helmand Province

U.S. Marine Corps (Robert Piper)

extortion than a functioning central government. The Morrison-Knudsen [Corporation] in the late 1950s and early 1960s built some dams and buildings with money from the Asian Development Bank and other international financing, and it was a peaceful place, not part of a nation but peaceful because people were left alone to pursue the life they had “since Alexander.” And then the Taliban emerged and saw the profits of poppies that the Soviets and we—believing commerce was more important than simply raising food for local consumption—inspired, and voilà, we have today’s Helmand Province where the Taliban has bogged down U.S. forces.

Western puppet. Whatever he embraces, they will not.

This is not to say that they cannot think or are too immature to master their own future. It is just that—as I have found in living with them—they focus on what will happen tonight, what they will eat tomorrow, who is tomorrow’s enemy, and how they can avenge the wrongs done to their family last month, last year, or a generation ago. Given their history, this is a predictably short and narrow view. One can fondly remember the “green hills of Afghanistan” from the 1970s, but that existed until 1979 because the people wanted to live in peace and harmony, not because some central governmental authority mandated it.

Waziristan, where they are still working the problem. They have moved some troops into South Waziristan, but that is primarily a holding action until they create some breathing room in the north and can free up men and munitions for actions in the south. Their claims and media reports notwithstanding, it is still not a full-scale offensive in either North or South Waziristan. Part of the problem was and is that the Pakistani ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence] was so involved in supporting the Taliban that the government has had to sort out what they want to do and who is going to do it—a seriously muddled situation. The recent aggressive moves by the Pakistani government reflect a major schism between the Taliban and the ISI, who have been their under-the-table patrons. If the ISI responds, it will help cement the Pakistani government’s response against the militants. It will be interesting to see the effect this has on India and whether it too will rise against the Taliban. To date, the only really successful efforts may continue to be support mounted by our paramils, who are not legal authorities there.



Afghan minister of foreign affairs listens to injured Afghan soldier talk about suicide attack near International Security Assistance Force Headquarters

U.S. Army (David Alvarado)

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General Warner: What are your thoughts on handling the Taliban problem in the FATA?

C: I believe, since the Pakistanis do not control the FATA, that sooner or later someone will have to recognize the Taliban as a political presence. If—a *large* if—U.S. forces can rid most of Afghanistan of the Taliban, notably in the South around Kandahar and in the Helmand Valley, and can block them from coming in from Pakistan, our paramils, with increased Pakistani army support, can perhaps winnow down enough of them in the FATA to stabilize most of the area. We might then be able to isolate the Taliban and reduce their numbers. The key is the a priori conditions the United States could—or even should—impose on the electoral process. Do not make our Western sense of justice or government a precondition; virtually all Afghans I have spoken with want us out

I am very pessimistic about attempts to bring about a unified national entity in Afghanistan that most Afghans would place above their village and tribes. The best I can see is a federation of tribes—a kind of medieval Poland—where borders, land, and water-sharing are clearly spelled out. To make a federation of tribes work, I think Pakistan would have to cede some FATA land—perhaps Kurram and three of the Frontier Regions to be administered by UN [United Nations] buffers. And this has to be done by agreement among Muslim states, without the United States or other Western powers in the mix. Most of the Afghans I speak with barely acknowledge, if at all, President [Hamid] Karzai as other than a

General Warner: Do you consider Afghanistan as home base for those plotting, guiding, and directing global terrorism?

C: No, not hardly. While Afghanistan and Pakistan are indistinguishable as hosts to terrorism, the FATA is the locus of problems. I do not believe that anyone in contemporary times, short of historians, recognizes in any way the Zero or Durran Line—certainly not the Afghans or Pakistanis I have spoken with. Perhaps we should leverage Pakistan’s abdication of governing the FATA to bring the FATA issue to the UN Security Council?

True, the Pakistani military has been effective finally in the Swat Valley, and with those successes they have moved to North

and that means Western influence, not just troops. Maybe we could arrange to establish this under the auspices of non-U.S., largely Muslim-nation UN oversight and remove all U.S. presence except for requested USAID projects to rebuild or improve the physical infrastructure.

As a further complication, Pakistan is not much concerned with the Taliban, except as a threat to the Pakistani government, and this is increasing because their focus is on India. Officials of the Pakistani government must draw permissions from the FATA tribes to enter the area, and these are only good for a specific agency or frontier region.

As for most of Western Pakistan, we are not much involved except to provide money, materiel, and political words. The Pakistani army is 20 percent Pashtun—the Taliban is mostly Pashtun with some non-Pashtun Afghan conscripts—and 80 percent Punjabi, discounting minor fringe players, and Pashtun and Punjabi have been fighting for years, I think before partition. As I said earlier, the Pakistani ISI is the direct conduit from the Pashtun elements to the Taliban, and these elements increasingly swing toward an alliance with the Taliban.

General Warner: Seizing terrain with the raw courage of soldiers without the application of supporting firepower is an unpardonable sin to an old infantry commander who has been permitted “to comb gray hair because of it.” On the other hand, aerially delivered ordnance without the benefit of ground observation too often causes unacceptable collateral damage and loss of civilian lives. How do we reconcile this?

C: The surveillance birds are invaluable—particularly those with high resolution and extended station time. I have to waffle a bit here because of the open forum that we are using. The Predator/Hellfire system is an incredibly effective weapon. The Pakistanis seem to be in favor of it so long as they are in control of the tasking and the missile releases. If not, they cry “collateral damage!” For well over a year and frequently since, I have fed you observations on the effectiveness of our UAS [unmanned aircraft system] hits on the Taliban in the FATA, how this was countering the Taliban threat and damaging Taliban organizations, logistics, and morale, and enabling us, in many instances, to corral them

where we wanted. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article discussed our successes succinctly and accurately. We have had the assets to call some strikes across this border that have clobbered some Taliban training centers and depots, but the successes are too few and each one has to be argued. We have spotlighted many more than we have been able to hit.

down from their 25,000-foot perch and out of their labs and analysis centers and explain to a mother why the United States leaves “toys” to maim her kids. I have held and bandaged so many kids and tried to comfort so many mothers that I refuse to distinguish between their use and the atrocities of murdering militant Muslims. And yes, they do look to kids like

those satisfied with the status quo of cluster-bombs need to come down from their 25,000-foot perch and out of their labs and explain to a mother why the United States leaves “toys” to maim her kids



U.S. Marine Corps (Artur Shvartsberg)

Not that UAS and ground-directed strikes by covert forces are the total answer to keeping the Taliban in check, but as long as we can subdue them in southern Afghanistan and keep those in the FATA from finding refuge in Afghanistan, we might achieve some level of stability.

I should interject a word of caution regarding some U.S. and other Western technology. While we continuously exercise bragging rights over our advanced technology, we cannot seem to build bomblets with timed fuses to self-detonate or become inert if they do not impact targets within minutes after delivery. We cannot color-code or mark the bomblets that do not explode on delivery. Those satisfied with the status quo of cluster-bombs need to come

MRE [meal, ready-to-eat] packs with candy. We damage our standing with the Afghans and Pashtuns far more with these munitions than by any of the UAS strikes. Believe it.

General Warner: I understand your readings on the Afghans, Taliban, and Pakistanis. So where do we go next in terms of strategy?

C: My suggested options are all worthy of objective critique and winnowing to the balance that are acceptable to the Afghans and Pakistanis, even if only marginally so to the U.S. political establishment. The ordering of these recommendations does not connote any prioritization.

1. Immediately initiate a three-pronged PSYOP [psychological operation] program using all media—Internet, radio, television, and discussion forums:

a. PSYOP #1: Explain in Islamic terms and context why we are in Afghanistan. The objective is security for the United States and for Afghans and not to reform Afghanistan in a Western image. We must emphasize the U.S. desire to leave as soon as possible; our desire to help the tribes maintain their own security; and our intention to render infrastructure rebuilding and construction where requested, on a dollar-matching basis with the Pakistanis and coalition members. Far from historical vestiges, tribes are more the focus of security than police or the much-vaunted ANA, the deployable size of which is far less than advertised by the Afghans or the United States. If there is to be a “government” in any form, it must be of the Afghans’ making.

Caution: There is a potential downside to showing the “Afghan face,” and this makes it a balancing act. The more the police presence looks Afghan, the more we look like an occupying force, and the Afghans will want us out even more urgently. Also, there is a social as well as civil discipline in policing that, absent generations of a police legacy, may well lead to militia-like abuses—a lesson to learn from Iraq—and demands for *baksheesh*—extortion—for protection. I use the term “Afghan face” to connote an impression, not a nation, as there are many, many Afghan faces. My point addresses the increasing Afghan view that the United States has become an occupying power. In my discussions, the local administration is bifurcated, anointed by Kabul and local tribal leaders, and the latter pay little loyalty to the central government.

b. PSYOP #2: Counter al Qaeda and Wahhabism-Koranic spin with teachings by moderate and accepted Arabic scholars selected from across Islamic countries—Arab and other.

c. PSYOP #3: State firmly our intent to decimate al Qaeda and its supporters in the FATA to protect noncombatants.

2. Appoint Pakistani, Afghan, and Iranian ambassadors, businessmen/scholars conversant with the diversity of Islamic culture and history. Embassy staffs need to include persons with backgrounds in this and in agriculture, civil engineering, and communications.

Repeatedly in people’s homes I have heard—politely expressed because in the

Islamic tradition of *Pashtunwali milmastia*, I am a guest—wishes that we would tangibly help, not merely promise, to improve sanitation and water facilities, but with a not-so-hidden wish that we would leave as soon as that was done. To them, these are local issues with no “national” significance.

3. Open a private dialogue with Iran, initially working toward NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] partnership to assist Iran in gaining recognition and respectability in the Middle East.

4. Encourage Iranian and Tajik economic exchanges, even fund them if necessary, to further fence and contain Afghanistan.

5. Encourage cultivation of foodstuffs, biofuel, and plants for fabrics and industrial uses as alternatives to cocaine poppies and drug production.

6. Encourage mutual interests of Tajikistan, China, and India to diplomatically squeeze Pakistan.

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7. Enlist China’s aid to cool off Kashmir and further politically squeeze Pakistan.

8. As a political—not military—statement, increase significantly the number of armed Predator and Hellfire strikes on Taliban strongholds and movements in the FATA. Do not deploy and definitely forbid others the use of Hermes 450, Eitan, or any UAS being used by Israel in the Gaza to avoid adverse propaganda.

9. Treble the covert action special operations and paramil forces we have operating in FATA forward and deploy also into the rear areas of North and South Waziristan and Tribal Agencies of Kurram, Khyber, Mohmand, and Bajaur. These operations should primarily be conducted after dark.

10. Accept no logistic routes offered through or controlled by [Vladimir] Putin and company. Recognize that he remains KGB/Federal Security Service with the burning ambition to restore the Soviet hegemony.

11. Secure the Afghan eastern “border” in Afghanistan with U.S. combat troops but allow no incursions by them into the FATA.

I have omitted COIN from these recommendations, not to dismiss its value as a tool, but because, in Afghanistan or more correctly the total Afghanistan-Pakistan theater, we are not confronted by the same type of insurgency that we saw in Iraq where the revision to FM [Field Manual] 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*, found its genesis. Let’s not continue to blindly accept the COIN bumper sticker without realizing how the acronym needs to be practiced in the Afghanistan/Pakistan theater. The term has taken on so many colorations to attract the broadest possible constituency that it is virtually without value as a prescription for specific actions.

There is an offensive aspect—covert COIN—reputed to be used successfully in the FATA that I cannot discuss in any detail in this forum. It has apparently been practiced with safeguards and checks against becoming another Vietnam-era Operation *Phoenix* and seems to effectively employ proactive PSYOP and “legend building.”

The primary U.S. objective should be the elimination of terrorists and their networks that present threats: the Taliban and—separate but related—al Qaeda and whatever other decentralized organization networks Osama bin Laden has and can create. This should not be conflated with nationbuilding.

To eliminate these terrorists requires denying organizations recruits and destroying those aligned with them. To stifle their recruiting, we need first to provide the population a measure of security from Taliban threats, and the most effective way to do this is to eliminate the militant Taliban elements. Only then does the building of infrastructure become relevant or even possible. As Brigadier [Justin] Kelly [Australian Army, (Ret.)] said in his recent *Quadrant* magazine essay, “No one places their life and the lives of their families at risk by rejecting Taliban authority merely because they have, or are promised, more electricity or cleaner water.”

My experiences living with the Afghans yield a totally different take than the news media’s pro-Karzai attitude and what we face in “nationbuilding.” It’s high time the American people were faced with the reality of what Afghanistan is not and what it will cost in national resolve, blood, and treasure to realize their politicians’ idealism. Alice’s wonderland is a closer reality, and I say this knowing and loving the Afghan people. **JFQ**