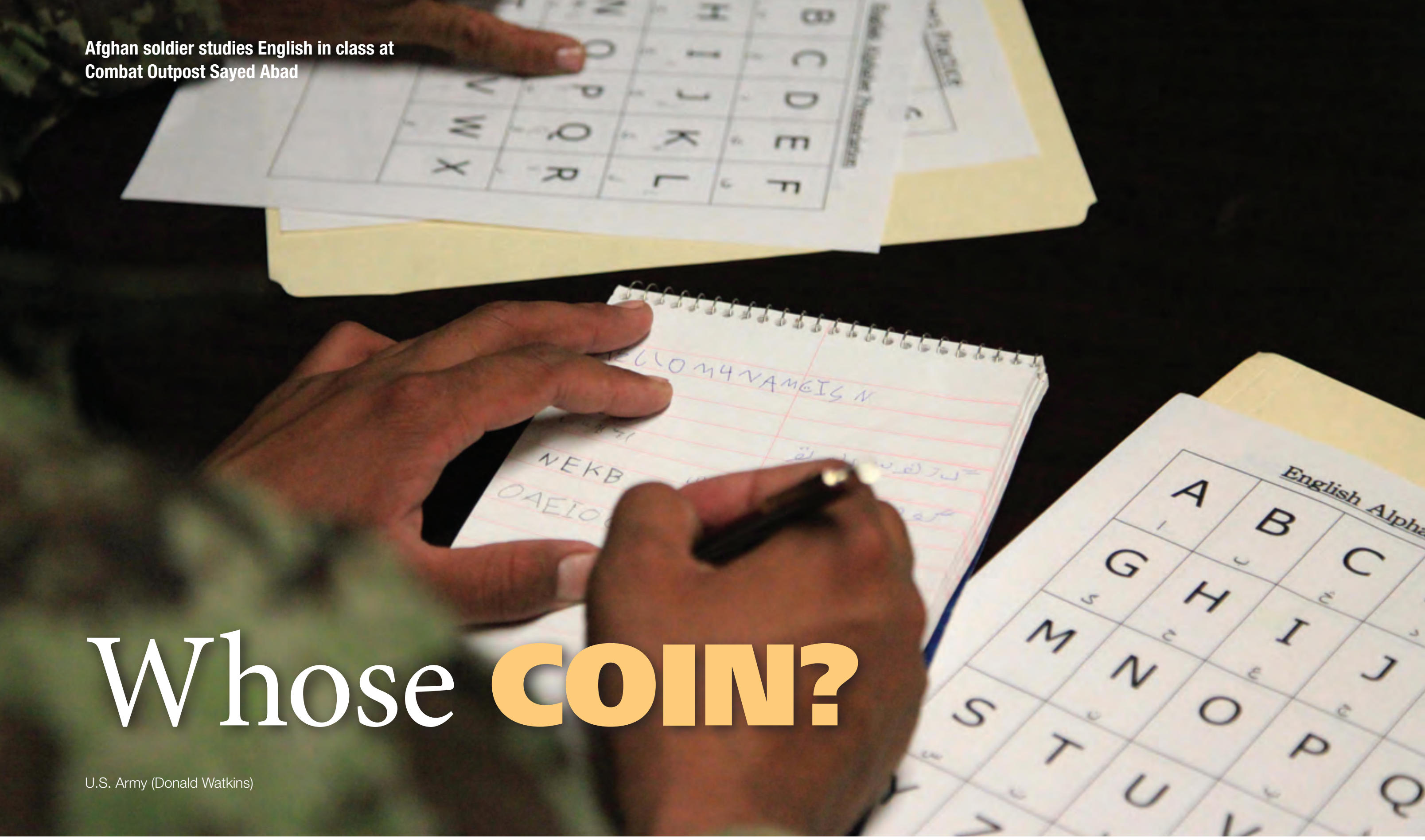

Afghan soldier studies English in class at Combat Outpost Sayed Abad

U.S. Army (Donald Watkins)

Whose COIN?

By AMITAI ETZIONI

When American and Iraqi army units were integrated to foster closer cooperation between the groups and to intensify Iraqis' training, a number of challenges arose with regard to the latrines they were to share. The Iraqi soldiers, many of them farm boys, were used to relieving themselves by squatting above holes. When they were made to use Western facilities, they squatted on the toilet seat rims, sometimes making, sometimes missing, their target. They also used their left hands instead of toilet paper and cleaned their hands by wiping them on the walls of the latrines. This situation left the Americans with three options: adapt to the Iraqi way, teach the Iraqis the American way, or let each group follow its own culture and set up separate latrines. The third option was selected.[1]

In trying to build a professional, national Afghan police, the United States posted members of one tribe in the territory of other tribes, on the grounds that the tribe members should give up their local identities and become loyal Afghan cops. As one observer put it, "They might as well paint targets on their foreheads."[2] Indeed, many of the new policemen refused to leave their compounds, and others simply vanished.

In Marjah, U.S. military officials have decided not to eradicate the poppy fields because they provide a major source of income for farmers—much more than they could make from the alternative crops the Americans were fostering. At the same time, the military is concerned that profits from poppy sales are a key funding source for the Taliban. Hence, the U.S. military is engaged in some eradication, some of the time.

These three situations illustrate a critical point that the champions of counterinsurgency (COIN)[3] have not worked out: are they going to accept the local culture and practices and work with and around them—a fixer-upper approach? Seek to change the culture extensively and follow a new construction approach? Or continue to treat this key matter in a confused and conflicted way?

In sorting out this issue, I do not rehash the well-covered debate over whether COIN, understood as a combination of military forces and political reconstruction, is a superior strategy to traditional warfare in which the enemy is defeated and U.S. forces withdraw. Nor will I compare COIN to the course Vice President Joe Biden advocated, which entails withdrawing all U.S. and allied ground troops from Afghanistan and suppressing the remaining terrorists through drone and bombing attacks and some remaining Special Forces—the way the United States currently does in Yemen.

My main argument takes for granted that COIN is called for, but holds that if COIN is to work, *it must be profoundly recast*. The recasting would best occur through three highly interwoven facets: setting much lower, but more realistic, goals for the political element; determining which elements can be introduced into the prevailing culture (rather than building new ones, Western-style) and which—optimally few—elements of the local culture must be rejected; and drawing much more on forces already in place (often local and tribal) rather than forging new, often national, forces. In their recent article on Afghanistan, T.X. Hammes, William McCallister, and John Collins, after demonstrating that the key assumptions that underlie COIN are not supported by evidence, called for a new strategy.[4] This article takes a stab at that mission.

The underlying sociological thesis, based on my 50 years of studying societal change, is that societal engineering is difficult to

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U.S. Army (David Franklin)

U.S. and Iraqi soldiers conduct first combined patrol in Taji

bring about; that advancing societal changes according to one's design (in contrast to societal changes that occur on their own account) typically requires a much greater commitment of resources over much longer periods of time than is widely assumed and available; and that most such projects are prone to failure.

This thesis gained traction in the 1980s when the neoconservatives pointed out that most of the liberal Great Society programs introduced in the United States in the 1960s failed. The government was unable to eradicate poverty, help minorities to catch up, improve public schools, or stop drug abuse. More generally, the neocons argued that it was wrong to assume that a combination of programs fashioned by civil servants and large amounts of money could solve social problems. Even so, as of 2003, the same neocons maintained—and COIN implies—that what the United States could not do in Los Angeles and Washington, DC, it could do in Helmand, Kandahar, Mosul, and Sadr City.

As a matter of fact, the difficulties in bringing about societal engineering are particularly severe when the change agent is a foreign power with a different culture, thousands of miles away, prone to optimistic, even idealistic, assumptions, and often not inclined to commit large amounts of resources to a given course for long periods of time. In other words, long-distance societal engineering is even more failure-prone than domestic societal engineering. An extensive 2006 report on the scores of billions of dollars that the World Bank invested since the mid-1990s in economic development shows that the "achievement of sustained increases in per capita income, essential for poverty reduction, continues to elude a considerable number of countries." Out of 25 aid-recipient countries covered by the report, more than half (14) had the same or declining rates of per capita income from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. And the nations that thrived were not necessarily those that received much aid. Indeed, while the nations that received very little aid grew very fast (especially China, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan), the nations that received most of the aid (especially ones in Africa) developed least.

Many nations found foreign aid a "poisoned gift" because it promoted dependency on foreigners, undermined indigenous endeavors, and disproportionately benefited those skilled at proposal writing and courting foundations and foreign aid representatives, rather than local entrepreneurs and businessmen. Steve Knack of the World Bank showed that "huge aid revenues may even spur further bureaucratization and worsen corruption." Others found that mismanagement, sheer incompetence, and weak governments undermined many attempts at development (which is another term for *societal engineering*). All this is relevant to COIN, because it contains many of the elements of foreign aid and thus faces many of the same challenges.

All this is not to suggest that when one has an urge to engage in societal engineering, one should lie down until the urge goes away. It suggests that COIN is much more likely to succeed when it greatly limits the extent to which one seeks to change the society at issue, accepts large elements of the culture as it is, and draws as much as possible on native forces rather than vainly seeking to forge new ones. Less is more.

An obvious example is the now widely agreed upon observation that the United States would have been much better off in Iraq if it had left the Ba'ath army and civil servants in place. At the same time, this does not mean that the change agent cannot introduce some, albeit limited and carefully selected, modifications. For instance, the highest ranks (especially the political leaders) of the Ba'ath party could have been dismissed.

The Scope Issue

COIN calls for an encompassing do-over of the societies at issue. Wendy Brown writes that:

> *If the manual* [Field Manual 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*] *can be reduced to a single didactic point, it is that successful war against insurgents involves erudite and careful mobilization of every element of the society in which they are waged. These wars are won through a new and total kind of governance, one that emanates from the military but reaches to security and stability for civilian life, formal and informal economics, structures of authority, patron-client relationships, political participation, culture, law, identity, social structure, material needs, ethnic and linguistic subdivisions, and more.*[5]

Stathis Kalyvas put it as follows: "In short, this is a strategy of competitive state building combining targeted, selective violence and population control, on the one hand, with the dissemination of a credible mass ideology, the creation of modern state structures, the imposition of the rule of law, and the spurring of economic development."[6] General Stanley McChrystal's definition was more limited, but he still held that the United States must "promote good local governance, root out corruption, reform the justice sector, pursue narcotics traffickers, [and] increase reconstruction activities."[7]

It is often argued that the United States had no plan for postwar Iraq. In fact, prior to the 2003 invasion, the Department of State had prepared a massive 13-volume study known as *The Future of Iraq Project*.[8] The study provided plans for reconstruction projects for myriad institutions and sectors—water, agriculture and environment, public health and humanitarian needs, defense policy, economy and infrastructure, education, justice, democratic principles and procedures, local government, civil society capacity-building, free media, and oil and energy, among many others.

As a result of such a wide-ranging, scattershot approach, scores of projects were started, but few have been completed. Indeed, many were abandoned because there were not enough funds to complete them. The woes of development in Afghanistan have been so often told that they hardly need repeating. John Nagl captures the point exceedingly well in a book whose title says it all: it is akin to "learning to eat soup with a knife"—one might add, while fighting a war.

Less Is More

All the preceding observations do not suggest that COIN cannot succeed in the kind of countries in which it is now applied, but rather that it must be greatly scaled back. Its commanders and societal engineers would be well served by daily recitation of the prayer familiar to recovering addicts: "God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference."

I asked one of the highest ranking U.S. commanders in the Middle East what our sociological goal was in Afghanistan.[9] What was the nonmilitary "build" element of COIN trying to accomplish—to turn Afghanistan into a society like, for instance, Jamaica, Nigeria, or India—or Chicago, circa 1900? He responded, "We will turn them into Switzerland in 2 years."[10] Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated that the United States is not trying to turn Afghanistan into a 21st-century society.[11]

These short quotations highlight the analytical and political difficulties in setting a realistic goal. Thus, if the general and Secretary Gates had stated that the United States would be quite content to turn Afghanistan into, say, an Egypt (or any comparable regime), they would invite voluminous criticisms from human rights advocates, champions of democracies, Afghan elites, and many in the Third World. At the same time, without setting a much more scaled-back and realistic goal than, in effect, a do-over of the social, economic, cultural, and political foundations of the society, one invites failure by setting goals that cannot be reached and by raising expectations that are bound to be disappointed, especially among the local people whose hearts and minds COIN is seeking to win.

Arguably the best way to proceed is to set what might be called "basic" goals, while leaving the door open to going beyond them once they are achieved. The goal is best set on a level that can be achieved in a reasonable amount of time (measured in years and not decades) and with the resources available—in plain English. Because this approach also calls for building largely on what is in place, the specific goals would differ from one COINed country to another, depending on its assets and foundations.

A Question of Culture

On one hand, even a buck private knows that we ought to respect the local culture. On the other, much of the societal engineering the United States is involved in assumes that certain things can be changed—and in relatively short order. Take the way women are treated in Afghanistan. Our tendency is to promote equality for women. Thus, the United States pressured the Afghans to require that at least 25 percent of the seats in the Afghan parliament be set aside for women (a requirement it neither adheres to nor is the U.S. meeting in its own legislative bodies, from Congress to state assemblies). And American representatives proudly state that the United States built schools that accommodate more than 2 million girls in Afghanistan. However, such developments alienate significant segments of the population in many parts of that country, as well as in southern Iraq, critical parts of Pakistan, and most of Yemen, among others.

I am in favor of urging Afghan society to respect the rights of women and all others. But it does not necessarily follow that changing centuries-old sociological traditions, habits, and institutions—many rooted in the religious beliefs large segments of the population profoundly hold—can be part of these first-round, basic efforts.

Truth be told, it is difficult even to openly discuss the question: Which of its rights should the United States insist the locals respect, and which ought the United States let the local population fight for and gain on its own—or adapt to its own culture? Take the separation of state and religion, which U.S. representatives seek to promote in Muslim nations. One should recall that this precept is largely a French and American idea most other democracies, let alone the rest of the world, do not abide by. The United States would do well not to engage this issue, which happens to be especially important to the Taliban, whose number-one condition for peace is the introduction of sharia as the basis of law. One may argue that Muslim religious traditions and laws, like all others, are subject to both stricter and more permissive interpretations, and that the United States and its allies should hold out for some of the more moderate interpretations. As I see it,

Agricultural Develop
UNITED STATES AGENCY INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
USAID
USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

ISAF (Joseph Swafford)

At International AgFair in Kabul, representatives provide information on agriculture in Afghanistan, one of Central Asia's fastest growing markets one should leave it to the local population to decide which interpretation it is willing to live by, which, by the way, changes over time (as we see in Iran), rather than employ foreign troops to ensure that one version of a religion rather than another will prevail.

On the other hand, there are some human rights abuses so egregious that the United States should not tolerate their violation. An outstanding example is the practice of pedophilia, in which rich and powerful Afghans continue to engage.[12] Torture might well be another example. Indeed, several major religions draw such a line. Thus, Catholics differentiate between mortal and venial sins, and Jews have a list of 613 dos and don'ts, but only view 3 as cardinal rules for which one should die rather than transgress.

The strong inclination to Westernize or Americanize the local society and especially its security forces extends way beyond the promotion of rights. There are numerous reasons the training of the police in Afghanistan is such a prolonged, costly, and abysmal failure, and that the army, while doing much better, has such a long way to go. These include an insufficient number of trainers, lack of coordination among the various nations and agencies that are involved, and threats by the Taliban. One should not, though, overlook that another key retardant to creating a viable Afghan police and army is that the United States and its allies are seeking to Westernize them, rather than trying to piggyback some limited additions and improvements onto their way of conduct and fighting. Here is the way one reporter illustrates the point at issue:

> *Their American trainers spoke of "upper body strength deficiency" and prescribed push-ups because their trainees buckle under the backpacks filled with 50 pounds of equipment and ammo they are expected to carry. All this material must seem absurd to men whose fathers and brothers, wearing only the old cotton shirts and baggy pants of everyday life and carrying battered Russian Kalashnikov rifles, defeated the Red Army two decades ago. American trainers marvel that, freed from heavy equipment and uniforms, Afghan soldiers can run through the mountains all day—as the Taliban guerrillas in fact do with great effect—but the U.S. military is determined to train them for another style of war.*[13]

Moreover, the recruits are coming from the poorer layers of a poor society. Many are short (5½ feet tall or under) and slightly built. There are not enough push-ups in the world to make them into American hulks.

Another example concerns the weapons themselves. The United States is introducing the M–16 rifle as a replacement for the venerable Kalashnikov. However, even U.S. trainers admit that in Afghanistan, the Kalashnikov is the superior weapon. Light and accurate, it requires no cleaning even in the dust of the high desert, and every man and boy already knows it well. The strange and sensitive M–16, on the other hand, may be more accurate at slightly greater distances, but only if a soldier can keep it clean, while managing to adjust and readjust its notoriously sensitive sights.[14]

I leave it for another day to ask what the proper balance for COIN is between conventional and irregular forces (or Special Forces), an issue of special interest to me as I fought in both capacities. I should, though, note in passing that to the extent that U.S. training takes irregular fighters and turns them into regular ones, this may not be the best way to counter an irregular force, which the insurgents invariably are.

The more COIN uses the local culture, habits, and instruments as the stock to which it grafts any necessary changes, the more successful it will be.

Legitimacy and Politics

One of the key elements of COIN, arguably the most important nonmilitary one, is political development. In numerous discussions of this strategy, much weight is accorded to ensure that the government is legitimate and effective. This is correctly deemed necessary, as COIN requires that one win the hearts and minds of the population in order to get it to shift its allegiances from the insurgents to U.S. troops and/or the local partner. Also, politics are sought to absorb conflicts among various forces in society and allow the working out of differences in a peaceful manner, avoiding civil war or the kind of anarchy that favors the insurgency. In addition, it is considered essential to greatly reduce corruption and develop an effective civil service that serves the people rather than enriching the elites.

All this may be true, but the way the United States often proceeds points one more time to the need to recast COIN to both greatly scale back its scope and build on the culture in place. The United States tends to assume that a government gains legitimacy in one way: the democratic way—*our way*. Hence, the United States expends much effort in introducing new politics based on fair and open elections and elected bodies of representatives, and those who have a high level of integrity. And the United States exhibits an almost instinctive rejection of all other sources of legitimacy and forms of politicking. As a result, U.S. efforts face severe setbacks when it turns out that the elections are fraudulent and the political and civil servants are corrupt to the core.

The *Washington Post* examined the forms people fill out when they carry cash out of Afghanistan. There are no limits, but one has to declare. It turns out that the amount carried out on flights to Dubai alone (which does not include the amount carried by those who use the VIP section of the Kabul airport, who are almost never asked to fulfill this requirement) totaled $180 million over a 2-month period. Assuming that rate held constant for an entire year, the total amount would exceed Afghanistan's total annual domestic revenue.[15] Afghanistan is the world's second-most corrupt nation of 180 countries, as surveyed in 2009 by Transparency International.

There are, however, other ways in which legitimacy can be attained. And most people have distinct institutions and ways of selecting leaders and resolving conflicts: tribal councils, for instance, or community elders. Religious authorities also serve to guide, influence policies, and resolve differences. Moreover, many people often rely on what might be called "natural" leaders —those who rose to power due to their charisma, leadership they exhibited during wars, lineage (they come from what are considered "important" families), or religious status, but who were not elected in the Western way.

COIN would benefit if the United States worked with the institutions and leaders already in place. Thus, when Prime Minister Hamid Karzai assembled some 1,500 traditional leaders in May 2010 in a "Peace Jirga," seeking to reaffirm his legitimacy (and gain a mandate for negotiation with some elements of the Taliban),[16] the initial U.S. reaction was rather negative. However, such a jirga plays an important role in the politics of nations such as Afghanistan, although they are not based on elected representatives and *Robert's Rules of Order*.

To illustrate the role of natural leaders, it might serve to consider the case of Matiullah

Khan, a fairly typical account. In southern Afghanistan's Oruzgan Province, the private security company he leads has supplanted many of the weak Afghan government's functions. Matiullah's army is the primary provider of security in the region; U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces pay Matiullah millions of dollars each month to secure roads for convoys. His militia also fights insurgents alongside U.S. Special Forces and gathers intelligence. Forces in the region view Matiullah and other warlords as lesser evils, people who can help establish security in areas where the government is not stable enough.

Like many leaders of private militias that have emerged over the past few years, Matiullah provides the province with more than just stability. He appoints public employees, endows scholarships, donates money for mosques, and holds weekly meetings with tribal leaders. It is estimated that he employs 15,000 people in the province.

Nowhere is the ambitious new building approach more visible—and more damaging—than in the U.S. support of a strong central national government, both in Iraq and in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the U.S.-backed government in Kabul appoints mayors and governors of provinces and districts, rather than holding elections for these posts. The approach is particularly odd coming from the United States—a nation that thrives on federalism—especially in states where there are strong local alliances based on ethnic and confessional groups, such as the Shia, Sunni, and Kurds in Iraq and the Pashtun, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras in Afghanistan, and weak national loyalties. Moreover, it ignores the fact that the so-called tribal leaders command sizable armies and had formed an alliance (the Northern Alliance), which won the war against the Taliban in the first place. In large parts of northern Iraq, the United States and its allies had almost no casualties and few Iraqis were killed. This was due to the fact that the Kurds' own sizable army, the 200,000-member Peshmerga,[17] kept peace, law, and order. Attempts to truly integrate it into a national army failed, although nominally one can argue that it was deputized.

the United States must also overcome its reluctance to work with religious leaders—but only those who reject violence

And Shia units, to the extent that they were let be, did rather well in controlling their turf, although, in several cases, Shia units clashed with each other. In Iraq, it was sheikhs who played the major role in the Sunni Awakening movement (and not the Sunnis' elected representatives in Baghdad), and they were the leaders that U.S. commanders turned to in the Anbar region (which includes Fallujah). These sheikhs were the leaders who decided to cooperate with the United States in taking on al Qaeda in Iraq, routing them from the region.

Instead, the United States sought to build professional national armies in which people dropped their group identities to represent their nation. Indeed, the United States initially sought to place Sunni units in Shia areas and vice versa in order to stress that they were serving their country and not their group. In Afghanistan, non-Pashtun police trainees of Hazara, Tajik, Uzbek, or other ethnic backgrounds were dispatched to maintain order in Pashtun territory.[18]

Clare Lockhart, an expert on Afghanistan, put it well when she testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that what was needed is a "'light touch' form of governance . . . where formal structures . . . can 'mesh' with local and traditional networks and social organizations. . . . Networks of traditional birth attendants, *hawala* dealers, traders, *ulema*, and teachers can all be mobilized or partnered with for different tasks."[19] In a 2008 survey, the Asia Foundation found that local representative bodies (both traditional ones such as the shura and jirga and newer ones such as the Community Development Councils and Provincial Councils) enjoy the support of about two-thirds of the population. In addition, almost 70 percent stated that religious leaders should be involved in local government decisionmaking.

When one raises these questions with commanders in the field, they respond that they deal with unelected local leaders and councils every day of the week. This is true. Indeed, since the middle of 2010—finally—attempts intensified to co-opt, win over, pay off, or otherwise work with local natural leaders. However, these efforts have run into intense opposition by the Karzai government, which sees such steps as undermining its authority and weakening its hold on power. Given that the United States continues to work with that central government as its main partner, local collaborations take at least one step backward for every two forward.

The tension between the strategic efforts that focus on the national versus the local level has been well captured by Stephen Biddle:

> *These problems have led to some significant divergences between actual U.S. strategy in Iraq and the approach embodied in the manual. In particular, the rapid growth of local negotiated cease-fires between American commanders and Iraqi insurgent factions in the field has increasingly posed an alternative to reform of the Iraqi national government in Baghdad as a means to stabilizing the country.*[20]

Aside from negotiating with local political and militant leaders, the United States must also overcome its reluctance to work with religious leaders and instead embrace and even favor them—but only those who reject violence. This short aside is crucial. Rather than treating all those who are strongly devout, often called "fundamentalists," as adversaries, one must draw a line between those who reject violence (whether or not they also embrace the values of a liberal democracy) and those who legitimate violence.[21] Among Muslims, there are those (in fact, the majority) who characterize jihad as a journey of self-improvement and those who view it as a war to kill all the infidels.

A prime example is Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani, the most revered Shia cleric in Iraq. He is highly influential among the largest Iraqi confessional group (some 60 percent of Iraqis are Shia) and a strong advocate of nonviolence. Initially, the United States sought to marginalize him. The reasons are telling: He is not elected by voters and thus does not fit the democratic model. However, if one accepts the basic tenet that one must start from where people are, not from where we believe they ought to be, one cannot ignore that many of the most influential people in the countries in which terrorists thrive are religious authorities.

Effective, Noncorrupt Government?

President Barack Obama was reported to have flown to Kabul at the end of March 2010 to convince the Karzai government to pay more attention to "battling corruption." The same demand has been repeated in numerous countries by scores of advisors from the United States, allies, and the World Bank, among others. Many anticorruption drives have been initiated, and practically all have failed, often resulting in the jailing of those who led the drive. One ought to remember that corruption was rampant in our parts until quite late in the economic and educational development of the United States (and the United Kingdom), not to mention in southern European countries, where it is still endemic, as well as in Russia, India, China, and most other nations.

When one raises this point, a common response is that "all" we need to do is reduce corruption from high, debilitating levels, to a low, tolerable level, which might even be functional, as it allows a greasing of the wheels of highly bureaucratic countries. A "fee" of 10 percent or so is said to be acceptable, while corruption higher than 20 percent is truly damaging. This cocktail party sociology, like many other factoids, sounds quite plausible but is not based on robust evidence. Nor is there a reliable way to bring corruption down in a country in which it is endemic and "too" high.

What can be done? We should leave the local people to work out what they will tolerate and what they will balk at. *Local* is the key word: Think of "The Godfather," Tammany Hall, or the aldermen in Chicago. Local leaders tend to take care of their cadres, supporters, and cronies, but also their "base" community. They have a sense of affinity and loyalty to their people and find that sharing the bounty (for example, jobs) allows them to stay in power. In contrast, civil servants, who are appointed by the national government and draw their power from the center, are often much more exploitative because they have neither local ties nor commitments and do not expect to stay in place for long periods of time. Hence, keeping corruption within limits itself suggests that working with the local population, leaders, and institutions is much more realistic than seeking to build professional national civil services. True, there are exceptions to this rule: a particularly abusive warlord or a local regime that is corrupt well beyond the "norm" is best removed. Here too, however, helping the locals rather than making such calls from long distance is likely to be more effective.

This is not exactly the way attempts to curb corruption—considered essential for building an effective and legitimate government, a key COIN element—developed in 2010. At first the United States pressured the Karzai government to curb corruption. When two Afghan anti-corruption task forces closed in on major sources of corruption at the highest level, President Karzai fired the two main public officials who led the anti-corruption drive. The United States then initiated an American-based drive, which so distressed Karzai that he imposed restrictions on the roles "foreign" organizations could play in anti-corruption investigations. Hence the United States declared that it would cease to deal with high-level corruption and instead focus on the local level, because this is allegedly what concerns the people most. According to one American official, "Predatory corruption at local levels by local officials is the most important factor in turning people from supporting the Afghan government to opposing it."[22] Actually, for reasons already indicated, the opposite seems to be the case.

I leave it for another day to ask what can be done about corruption that is generated by foreign contractors, corporations, and individuals that try to make their way in this country. However, there is no denying, given the huge sums involved, that while Western nations call for curbing corruption, they also contribute to it and do rather little to curb this imported corruption. Maybe the best place to start reforming Afghanistan is closer to home.

In the longer run, more encompassing reforms may be introduced, and the national government may grow in scope and powers. However, these developments are best led by the locals and at a pace they dictate.

There is an inherent contradiction at the core of COIN. On the one hand, its main goal is to build a legitimate and effective native government so the United States can disengage and leave behind a stable and reliable partner. On the other hand, Field Manual 3–24 states that "COIN requires Soldiers and Marines to be ready both to fight and to build."[23] Of course, the two can be reconciled—but only as long as the Soldiers and Marines seek to turn over their duties as soon as possible to the locals and realize that the more they follow local norms and institutions rather than try to redo them, the sooner COIN will be advanced. Another tension exists between those who hold that COIN should be carried out by the military and those who think it ought to be carried out by U.S. civilians. The State Department has long argued that its personnel are better suited for the "build" part of COIN than the military, although it has had a hard time finding enough staffers who are willing or can be motivated to serve in that capacity. The facts point in the same direction as the previous observation. If the military has a trained incapacity to build because its core training and recruitment criteria are based on the ability to fight, and American (and allied) civilians are not available, there is still more reason to draw on locals as much as possible, even if they follow their own norms on most issues.

Mission Creep

From the outset, COIN is a complicated vessel that must be carefully guided through challenging terrain. It is often burdened by adding missions to its core task to end the insurgency and leave behind a legitimate and effective government. Some of these missions may be fully justified; however, those who pile them on should realize that they further burden COIN, and that it might be overloaded to a breaking point. They had best restrain their ambition as much as possible, which is the subtext of this whole article.

One example will have to stand in for the many that could be provided. One of the major difficulties the United States faces in Afghanistan is that the Pashtun—the largest ethnic group in the country—feel left out (the way the Sunnis did in Iraq, only the Sunnis are the smallest among the three major groups in Iraq). The Pashtun are the primary source of supporters and recruits for the Afghan Taliban. The Pashtun also have close ties with the Pakistan Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Thus, it would make sense for the United States to work harder with the ISI to encourage the Pashtun to cease their role as the mainstay of the insurgency. However, the United States decided that Afghanistan must remain largely neutral ground between India and Pakistan because India is opposed to a major Pakistani influence over Afghanistan, and the United States is courting India as a countervailing power or balancer to China. Thus, COIN is hindered by a mission creep that includes complicated and arguably dubious regional and even global geopolitical considerations.

One is reminded of the ways Americans tend to build numerous items, from biomedical identification cards to fighter airplanes. We tend to add ever more specifications in order to enable the instrument du jour to carry out more missions, better. The result is typically an instrument that is costly, slow to complete, and prone to breakdowns. All this is true, only many times more so, when we are seeking to build nations in much less developed countries. Using local materials and restoring, rather than building de novo, are much more likely to succeed.

The problem is not that nationbuilding snuck in the back door after it was recognized as futile under many conditions. Initially, President Obama limited the goals in Afghanistan to eradicating al Qaeda. However, in the months that followed, the argument that this goal requires "building" won the day, which is a code word for nationbuilding. The problem is that the United States is engaged in the wrong kind of nationbuilding. It relies on a top-down approach rather than one that moves from the peripheries toward the center. This is a Western design, one that is much too ambitious and idealistic for the circumstances. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Mike Drummond, "At U.S. Base, Iraqis Must Use Separate Latrine," McClatchy-Tribune News Service, August 3, 2007.

[2] Ann Jones, "Meet the Afghan Army," *The Nation*, October 5, 2009, available at <www.the-nation.com/article/meet-afghan-army>.

[3] I assume that the reader is familiar with the basic concept and history of counterinsurgency. Those less initiated may wish to consult Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2009); U.S. Army Field Manual 3–24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3–33.5, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army/Headquarters Department of the Navy, 2006); John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

[4] T.X. Hammes, William S. McCallister, and John M. Collins, "Afghanistan: Connecting Assumptions and Strategy," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 135, no. 11 (November 2009).

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Strategic Forum 259
Global Commons and Domain Interrelationships: Time for a New Conceptual Framework?

The "global commons" comprises the geographic and virtual realms of space, international waters and airspace, and cyberspace—the essential conduits of U.S. national power in a rapidly globalizing world. According to Mark E. Redden and Michael P. Hughes, increasing challenges to the U.S. military are making access to the global commons more problematic. The traditional military approach, which has been domain-centric and one of geographic stovepipes (maritime, air, space, and so on), does not properly account for the complexities of domain interrelationships. The authors call for a new military planning paradigm that quantifies these interrelationships and seeks synergies and leverage in military operations by exploiting the overlap of domains.

Strategic Forum 260
Private Contractors in Conflict Zones: The Good, the Bad, and the Strategic Impact

The United States has hired record numbers of contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan, but has not seriously examined their strategic impact. T.X. Hammes first acknowledges the advantages that contractors do provide. He then discusses three inherent characteristics of using contractors that have serious negative impacts in counterinsurgency operations: the United States is unable to effectively control contractors, although the population holds it responsible for everything they do; contractors compete with the host government for qualified personnel, changing local power structures; and contractors reduce the political capital necessary to commit U.S. forces to war, undermining the legitimacy and perceived morality of a counterinsurgency. He concludes with practical guidelines for when and how the U.S. Government should employ contractors in war zones.

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