



June 30, 2007

On April 13, 2007, General Dan K. McNeill, the current NATO ISAF Commander, was invited to speak at the 2-day Land Forces Symposium in Islamabad, Pakistan. This event was co-hosted by the Pakistan Army and USARCEN. The theme of the symposium was “Common Security and the Global War on Terror.” Day one concentrated on “Global and National Security Concerns” and “Counterterrorism Capacity Building.” Day two focused on “Winning the Hearts and Minds of the People” and “Building Regional Partnerships.” The symposium was attended by 59 strategic military leaders—Deputy Chiefs of Defense, Chiefs of Land Forces, Chiefs of Army Staffs—from 20 nations from across the Middle East and Asia to include Afghanistan, Africa and the Pacific.

## **Synopsis.**

General McNeill's speech reflects on his experiences in Afghanistan as the NATO Commander of ISAF, as well as his time in 2002 to 2003 as Commander U.S. Combined Joint Task Force 180. In this speech, he discusses the centrality of popular support to the COIN campaign end-state and success; the necessity for a “comprehensive approach” to winning hearts and minds; and how Afghanistan is a unique “nation-building” challenge considering the difficulties associated with winning (and keeping) hearts and minds in a fractured tribal society where the will of the people is not quite effective.

## **The Speech.**

As the current Commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and a former Commander of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM forces under Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) 180, I would like to share some thoughts drawn from my experience in Afghanistan to address one of the main focus items of this symposium—Winning the Hearts and Minds of the People.

From the beginning of the Bonn Process until our recent reaffirmation of support under the London Compact, Afghans and the international community have subscribed to an aggressive program of building governance capacity in forms and in places where they have never before existed. It has been evident that this kind of social progress comes at some cost, at least partly at the expense of Afghan culture and tradition. What is not yet clear, is whether Afghans—or the international community—have fully calculated the costs versus benefits of these culture-for-progress tradeoffs, and whether

these transactions can hold in a society so deeply invested in its tradition. Can a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people succeed where fundamental changes to a people's way of life are required in the process?

Winning the hearts and minds requires us first to understand the people and their culture, their vital interests, and even more importantly, their vision of their future. The people, the culture, the nation, and the state all have a basic sense of identity, and we must treat that identity with the utmost respect, even while we work together to reform it consistent with their view of an acceptable future. Beyond understanding and respect for an Afghan identity, we also need to understand how to build the mechanisms that will enable them to secure themselves and prosper within that identity. For this, they will need to translate individual will through traditional structures into collective good, the good of the whole Afghan nation. This may be the most difficult part of the Afghan counterinsurgency campaign—building onto the traditional structures those new processes that account for an Afghan's sense of self, and which enables them to combine their will through both the traditional and newly built processes into an effective strategy that secures a suitable future for every Afghan.

In the course of campaign planning and campaign review for Afghanistan in ISAF, we have looked closely at the concept of centers of gravity for both the Afghan state and also the Afghan enemy. The will of the people seemed like a good start point—and an obvious candidate for center of gravity—given our assumption that winning the hearts and minds of the people over to the government was a prerequisite for long-term stability. What we found is that although the Afghan people have and are fully entitled to consideration of their individual *will*, the aggregation of their *will* through tribal and traditional structures simply does not add up to an effective expression of strategy at the national level. This confirms my experience in 2002 as Commander CJTF 180 where we identified the “Afghan inability to act responsibly and collectively” as one of two centers of gravity for the supported Afghan state.

First of all, the needs, wants, and fears of Afghans are difficult to transmit through the traditional structures and hierarchies because the layers of tribal leadership often amplify one tribe's needs at the direct expense of all others. In distributing goods and services, the system of baksheesh and patronage prevail, and these quickly strip out excess resources, removing the margin needed for meeting everyone's needs equally. At the level where intertribal and interethnic councils meet, the translation of tribal “will” comes in the form of compromise or trade-offs. The original details of the need or interest are lost. In the great zero sum game of resourcing in Afghanistan, the fulfillment of the needs for one group are diluted or negated by the fulfillment of needs for another.

In this environment, the hearts and minds of all but the most powerful can become meaningless. For these reasons, the “hearts and minds” of the people of Afghanistan was and remains difficult to adopt as a campaign center of gravity, especially at the strategic level. Afghans as a nation are challenged to exert their will—either positively or negatively—to influence the actions of the government or the enemy.

While this problem is less true by locale, we cannot conclude that the will of the people is a central source of strength for the Afghan nation, either for the government or for the insurgency. This reveals a central element of the Afghan nation-building charter—we must work with them to build the capacity to translate their collective will into action. And our view is that effective and representative governance is the only means by which we can see that the hearts and minds of the Afghan people can be won over and respected at a national level. Part of the problem is that representative governance in Western terms requires the building of structures and processes that compete directly with the basic functions of the tribal system.

Steven Pressfield, the best-selling author of *Gates of Fire*, and more recently *The Afghan Campaign*, addresses the characteristics and importance of tribalism in his writings. Having spent 2 years researching Alexander the Great's 7-year counterguerrilla campaign in Afghanistan, Pressfield was struck by similarity between Alexander's predicament and the conflict in Afghanistan today. He demonstrates that Alexander's war was not about religion, having predated both Christianity and Islam by hundreds of years, but rather it was based on the lack of compatibility between Greek and Afghan/Persian culture, traditions, values, and world views.

Pressfield sees the two cultures as "polar antagonists, incompatible and irreconcilable." Greek culture is seen as "modern and rational; its constituent unit is the nation." Afghan culture is seen as "ancient and visceral; its constituent unit is the tribe." Pressfield argues that Afghan society was tribal and that the invading Greek culture was not sufficiently comfortable with or accommodating to the tribal influences. In Alexander's experience, Afghans valued personal engagement, face-to-face relationships, and cohesion within small groups. They were strongly and proudly hierarchical within and among the tribes, and they maintained clearly defined leaders in each. Members understood and embraced the norms that defined each person's role within the tribe. The tribe was the primary source of strength and security for all its members, and for the society as a whole. And regardless of the threats or incentives applied to pacify them, they would quickly gravitate back toward their traditional base, even at the expense of their physical concerns.

After 3 years in his own quagmire, Alexander gives us the first look at a comprehensive approach for Afghanistan when he comes to better understand the tribal concept and modifies his campaign plan accordingly. Alexander granted the Afghans their pride and honor; he restored their status as warriors, and enforced respect for their women. From that time, he worked to incorporate the Afghans into his campaign by embracing their traditions and partnering with them. Force and pacification were still required to keep peace among the tribes. But, Alexander took on the Afghans as peers and built on the traditional strengths of their culture. This ultimately impacted in ways that Greek—or Western—influences could never have mirrored.

Many of the same tribal values and norms survive intact to this day, and they deserve our close consideration as we continue on our own campaign. Ignoring them or suppressing them will not serve us any better than doing so served Alexander. It is not likely that we can afford to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan nation at the

expense of the *will* of the tribe. Inspiring or discouraging individuals and tribes through intimidation or pacification are still necessary components of our COIN strategy, but they are necessarily subordinate in priority to the construction of that new mechanism that translates popular will into collective action. Without it, there is little hope of sustainable progress, and there is much risk of regression.

It is fortunate for now that the enemies of progress in Afghanistan are not grappling with this same problem. They have no incentive and little ability to make the people's *will* effective. Their long-term aim is to ignore the hearts and minds of the average Afghan, or change their views through repression and terror. Afghans primarily rely on tribal tradition and hierarchies versus institutional structures to meet their need for goods, services, and governance in their most basic forms. However, as the goods and services become more complex and modern or require more central management, we must carefully consider how we layer "national" capacities on top of the traditional ones. This is especially important in a culture that places no confidence in national institutions and is predisposed to resist centralization.

I have a recent personal illustration of the challenges we create when we interfere with the tribal constructs in the counterinsurgency environment. Traveling in a province of Afghanistan, I met with the local governor and the head of the provincial council. There is a small ISAF presence, only about 200 or so soldiers and civilians, working as a PRT in the capitol city center. The PRT recently helped coordinate the reconstruction of a nice health clinic to support the province. Running water in homes is another project. It is a poor province in terms of existing economy. But the people are careful with what they do have, and their pride shows in the city's main bazaar which is bustling.

In the near future the province will receive a great deal of reconstruction and development support, due partly to its proximity to future major road networks. Its capitol will soon become one of Afghanistan's first cities to benefit from municipal services like sanitation and running water. Things are changing for the better, even while the final decisions on the future course of the Afghan Ring Road are months away. The potential for sustainable progress and tangible changes to quality of life are evident.

When asked for his outlook, the head of the provincial council, a Pashto, suggested sternly "You must do more!" When asked to explain how the current efforts were not enough, he asked "What are you going to do for me?" He literally wanted to know what the international community and ISAF were going to do for "him." He was motivated first by his own personal gain, and he was brazen enough to represent his own self-interest at the direct expense of his community. This is neither tribalism nor healthy progressivism, it is simply bad governance and potentially a mistake. So how can a tribal community under this sort of leadership either give or take away their support? How can you win or lose the hearts and minds of the people with this man as council chief? This shows the result of tampering with otherwise useful tribal and traditional structures, and it creates governors and bodies of governed people who

cannot subscribe to the collective good at the expense of themselves, their families, or their tribe.

It is clear that this case is not an exception. Many current leaders in Afghan society hold positions of authority that place tribal needs and priorities subordinate to the personal fortune and interest of the leader. Extending governance to incorporate millions of displaced persons or the nomadic cultures represents an even greater challenge. Afghanistan is not an exceptional circumstance in this regard, as much the same dynamic is at play in Iraq and Somalia today. Tribalism does not perform well under artificial layers of western-style authority applied from outside or above. New governance solutions may need to be developed from within the tribal construct and consistent with a tribal end state.

Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations* identifies the sort of responses a state might adopt when challenged to modernize, Westernize, or both. In my mind, these sort of responses are relevant to the problems faced by Afghans as they struggle with their own national identity.

The first potential response is for the state to reject transformation and to protect its culture at all costs through isolationism. In this situation, the state detaches itself from the global community in the name of self-preservation. Afghanistan chose this path under the Taliban, and it led to the destruction of all national systems, credibility, and eventually their sovereignty. It also set conditions for the failure of the Afghan tribal system. This form of response has a track record of failure, and the hope expressed in the London Compact is that Afghans will not choose rejectionism as their future course.

The second possible form of response to a nation's challenge to change is when a state abandons its former culture and tradition in the radical pursuit of modernization and progress. This all-or-nothing response has some appeal to impatient nation-builders where propping up a *relatively* stable and secure international partner is the best possible short-term outcome. Huntington suggests that this process will produce highly conflicted or "torn countries" that must suppress vast internal instabilities.

The final form of national response offered by Huntington is reformism, which combines the careful acceptance and management of modernization with equally careful management of the changes to the existing culture. Reformism rejects the proposition that Westernism or any other "ism" can be neatly substituted for traditional customs and structures.

Afghans seem best suited for a reformist approach, as they are obviously eager to embrace certain aspects of progress but not at the expense of their basic identity. So, can modernization actually occur consistent with the traditional structures of Afghan tribal society without leading to the destruction of that tradition? Can and will individual Afghans support that kind of progress, and does their support really matter? In prosecuting our counterinsurgency campaign, we must help Afghans themselves successfully redefine their "cultural identity" or we should leave it alone. Should Afghans or any other people choose to redefine themselves through reformism, Huntington offers that there are three conditions that must to be met if they want to succeed. First, the elite of the country have to be enthusiastic about such a move;

second, the public must be at least willing to accept a change of their identity; and, third, the international community must be willing to embrace the redefined state.

With respect to the first condition, Afghan elites have not embraced a decisive approach to “redefine” Afghan identity. On the contrary, it seems clearer that preservation of Afghan culture is paramount. Second, average Afghans indicate that they will not readily give in to a radical redefinition of their identity. Finally, the international community has not clearly signaled its readiness to “embrace” a new Afghanistan once it has transformed itself. So none of the necessary conditions for redefinition of a civilization are evident in Afghanistan: As such, its transformation is likely to be prolonged and painful.

There is no denying that traditional Afghans are in the middle of an identity crisis, clinging to familiar structures that deny them their own voice and sometimes nullify their heartfelt desires and calculated self-interests. How can we help them overcome their tendency to withdraw to the security of isolation of their systems of patronage? What new and culturally acceptable structures could better empower them to express themselves as a nation?

Our COIN campaign for Afghanistan must build these structures upon the traditional framework of the culture. Only then can we help them create the capacities to capture and translate individual wants and needs in a collective “hearts and minds” strategy in a cohesive and vibrant state. After years of both progress and set-backs in Afghanistan, it is right for us, like Alexander, to reconsider the path we and the people of Afghanistan will take in redefining themselves. We must maintain aggressive but realistic goals, and carefully cultivate long-term support from the international community. Afghanistan is a unique nation-building challenge, where the need for a balanced and comprehensive approach is obvious. Carrots and sticks will be required, applying capabilities and tools from across the kinetic and nonkinetic spectrums that can both force and encourage progress in turn.

Our strongest hope is that Afghans will develop a strong sense of nationhood and a will to provide for the collective good. This demands that Afghans develop new concepts for association among the tribes and a new identity that transcends tribalism. Winning the hearts and minds lies at the decisive point of our campaign in Afghanistan. If we do not figure out how to discern a people’s will and respect it and make it effective in an acceptable cultural framework, then we are sure to frustrate our own progress. And any notion that we can “fast track” a nation-in-crisis toward a more modern form of government is wrong. For Afghans, it is their pride in their nation plus confidence in their traditional governing processes that will produce irreversible progress and positive change for all Afghans.