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## A War Examined: Afghanistan

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**ABSTRACT:** After more than a decade of effort and cost in Afghanistan, the United States is withdrawing from combat without bringing the war to a decisive end. There are important strategic lessons of limited war to be relearned from the recurring problems of policy, strategy, and performance that the United States has experienced in the four largest and most protracted military interventions it has undertaken since World War II.

Comprehensive assessments of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan will necessarily have to wait until the undertaking ends. Later, when history passes judgment, things may well come to look different than they seem today. At this point, however, nearly a dozen years after the United States reacted to 9/11 by launching what would become its most protracted direct foreign military intervention, there is scope to outline some strategic lessons that can serve as guideposts in future contingencies.

Perhaps it is inevitable that current appraisals tend to emphasize errors of both policy and performance while predicting that the best we can expect in Afghanistan is to muddle through.<sup>1</sup> Still, critical analysis should not be an excuse to ignore important accomplishments. If the costly, long, and trying intervention in Afghanistan has achieved only a rough approximation of success, it cannot be called misfortune or defeat. Afghanistan has remained stable, and despite the sufferings the war has entailed, a majority of Afghans say the country is moving in the right direction.<sup>2</sup> The current drawdown is not withdrawal, and substantial US and international commitment to Afghanistan is almost certain to continue in some form. Even though the American appetite for overseas expeditions has dulled, the United States military has endured prolonged strain to remain proficient, cohesive, and preeminent. These are not inconsequential results.

And yet, the sum of these accomplishments has not yielded a decisive outcome. This circumstance suggests a first-order question:

Why has more than a decade of enormous effort and cost in Afghanistan led to such inconclusive results?

A search for the answer at Carlisle or Newport would naturally involve consulting Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, and their fellow

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1 See, for example: Anthony C. Cordesman, "Afghanistan: The Death of a Strategy," *CSIS Commentary*, February 27, 2012, <http://csis.org/publication/afghanistan-death-strategy>; Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010); Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Random House, 2012); Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Matt Waldman, "System Failure: The Underlying Causes of US Policy-making Errors in Afghanistan," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 825-843.

2 The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2012: A Survey of the Afghan People," <http://asiafoundation.org/country/afghanistan/2012-poll.php>

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strategists for historical perspective. One way of applying the method to Afghanistan is to reframe the original question:

Why has the United States failed to achieve decisive outcomes on its terms in Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, and Korea, the four major and protracted wars it has fought since World War II?

True enough, major differences caution against risking facile comparisons and false analogies. In addition to contrasts in geography and geopolitics, Korea was essentially a conventional war; Afghanistan has been an irregular war; Vietnam and Iraq combined elements of both. Korea and Vietnam were conflicts over divided nations within the Cold War; Iraq and Afghanistan were post-9/11 “new wars.” After dangerous escalation, Korea successfully restored a tense status quo; Vietnam became a quagmire that ended in disaster; and in Iraq and Afghanistan, regime change provoked virulent insurgencies that persist today.

Nevertheless, a fundamental pattern recurred in each of these US wars. Robert Osgood first pointed to the problems in his 1957 book about Korea, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, which he updated in 1979 with *Limited War Revisited* about Vietnam. Others have reflected comparably on our recent limited wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>3</sup> In all four, US leaders found themselves responding by force of arms to what were perceived as urgent security challenges, and in the process transformed what had been countries of secondary or peripheral interest into centers of national mission. However, the more intractable these interventions became, the more they also became publically controversial. As the United States struggled to withdraw forces from combat, the level of political intensity declined, even though less than triumphal outcomes disproved the conviction that “in war there is no substitute for victory.”

The following seven lessons are a first cut at answering why Afghanistan has been so inconclusive and why it fits this larger pattern. Rather than explanations based on the complexities of Afghanistan itself or the new character of war in the 21st century, the principal issues stem from the nature of limited war, along with the enduring problems of policy, strategy, and performance that have always accompanied prolonged US military interventions. The emphasis here is on the “know yourself” half of the strategic equation, although there is not space to offer more than an outline of analysis and recommendations.

## The Lessons

### *Judging the Nature of War*

This often-quoted passage from Clausewitz seems a good starting point:

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<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979); for contemporary commentary, see Hew Strachan, “Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War,” *Survival* 52, no. 5 (October–November 2010): 157–182; Etienne de Durand, “Stabilization Operations in the Era of ‘New Wars’: Addressing the Myths of Stabilization,” paper presented at a symposium on the Role of the Military in Peacebuilding, Japanese National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), February 3, 2009, <http://www.nids.go.jp/english/event/symposium/e2008.html>.

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the commander and the statesman have to make . . . is the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for nor trying to turn it into something that it is alien to its nature.<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to this basic wisdom, civilian and military leaders have persistently misconceived the war in Afghanistan—and Afghanistan itself—as something to be turned into something else. If over-reaction to the first major foreign terrorist attack on US soil can be excused, the same cannot be said for inappropriate handling of military intervention and counterinsurgency. The most directly relevant parallels come not from the often-cited British and Soviet experiences in Afghanistan, but from the American experience in Vietnam. Rather than dismissing comparison between the two as “a false reading of history,” parallels abound, and at their root is how over-confidence in wealth and power led America astray. As Robert Komer, the first director of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) pacification program in Vietnam, concluded, “. . . the U.S. grossly misjudged what it could actually accomplish with the effort it eventually made. In this sense at least, the U.S. did stumble into a quagmire.”<sup>5</sup>

Although it does not mount to the same level of tragedy as Vietnam, our misconception of the nature of the war in Afghanistan similarly distorted our approach to policy and strategy. Pashtun tribesmen who join the insurgency (and virtually all of them are Pashtuns) are, in David Kilcullen’s insightful phrase, “accidental guerrillas.” They fight US soldiers (and most Afghans refer to foreign troops as Americans) because foreign soldiers happen to be in their space, and because they come from a proud warrior culture where jihad against infidel invaders is a universally understood cause.<sup>6</sup> By precisely the same logic, US troops in Afghanistan are accidental counterinsurgents. We fight the Afghan Taliban because the Taliban supported the terrorists who got into our space when they attacked New York and Washington, DC. But this war is not an accident that sprang from nowhere; al Qaeda and its Taliban hosts spawned from the mujahedin who fought the Soviet invaders in Afghanistan with US sponsorship in the 1980s. The point is not that the Cold War caused 9/11, but that the United States, through action and inaction, has been a contributing if unwitting protagonist since the origin of the Afghan conflict 34 years ago.

### *National Interest and the Changing Value of the Object*

The “value of the object” drives the strategic dynamics of war in Afghanistan. War aims have been determined politically and vary according to perceptions, with the duration and level of effort dedicated to achieving them changing in accordance.

The US national interest in dismantling, degrading, and defeating al Qaeda in Afghanistan is, in principle, intrinsically high value. The

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4 Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88.

5 The first quote is from President Barack Obama, “Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, December 1, 2009; Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on US-GVN Performance* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1972), vi.

6 David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

problem is that this goal has largely been accomplished. Additional intervention to reduce the Taliban insurgency, protect the Afghan people, and build the Afghan state is indirectly linked to counterterrorism. Because these aims are of less obvious value, and therefore vaguer, policy and strategy are more complicated and difficult to sustain.

The level of US (and the International Security Assistance Force [ISAF]) effort has consisted of two cycles, both of them reactive. The initial counteroffensive to overthrow the Taliban and expel al Qaeda in 2001-02 saw an area of marginal interest transformed momentarily into the highest national priority. The value of the operation in Afghanistan declined as the shock of 9/11 receded, the Taliban and al Qaeda appeared to have been defeated (despite missing Osama Bin Laden), and US attention diverted to Iraq. In the second cycle, the shift to NATO command in 2006 signaled renewed interest, which increased as it became apparent that the Taliban insurgency had not only revived but gained the initiative. System lag—including presidential elections followed by extensive reassessment—consumed almost another three years before the response came in the form of the surge, which lasted only from 2009-11. Prompted by frustration and fatigue, the current ISAF reduction represents a de facto lowering in the value of the object. The result is a curtailment of effort and duration with correspondingly limited aims of transition to Afghan responsibility by 2014 and negotiated conflict resolution with the Taliban, while maintaining a level of commitment to permit residual in-country counterterrorist capability and maintain basic stability.

### *The United States is not Exempt from the Limits of Power*

Afghanistan reaffirms that the United States, despite its exceptional character, is not exempt from the governing influences of limits. There are three types: The first type of limits result from intentional policy- and strategy-making to determine war aims and the means to achieve them. The second are external constraints of power in the form of, for example, prevailing moral and ethical norms, international laws, and the preferences of coalition partners or host governments. The third set of limits, and often the most determining, are the demands of war, which result from interaction between political and military effects in the course of conflict.<sup>7</sup>

There is widespread agreement that overthrowing the Taliban and establishing a new Afghan state was a just, timely, and well-executed response to the 9/11 attacks.<sup>8</sup> Problems arose from the dynamics of war that emerged afterward. In hindsight, elevating the manhunt to eradicate al Qaeda from Afghanistan into a vengeful and single-minded Global War on Terror amounted to an exaggerated reaction to an unfamiliar threat. The subsequent slide into deeper military intervention and coun-

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7 S.T. Hosmer, *Constraints on U.S. Military Strategies in Past Third World Conflicts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1984); Bradford A. Lee, "Strategic Interaction: Theory and History for Practitioners," in *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

8 Stephen D. Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for the Army and Defense Policy*, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2002); Henry Crumpton, *The Art of Intelligence: Lessons from a Life in the CIA's Clandestine Service* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012); James F. Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008).

terinsurgency warfare did not result from the failings of the Afghan government, nor did the Taliban and their associates demonstrate superior political or military competence in the revived insurgency. Rather, the primary reason the experience has been so costly, protracted, and inconclusive rests with the United States. Despite meaningful adaptation, critical policy contradictions have remained unmanaged and strategy has been largely reactive. Performance in securing and stabilizing Afghanistan has proved feckless, first through underinvestment, and subsequently through an over-ambitious yet time-bound surge followed by a hasty and fatigue-induced drawdown.

Multiple limits to power in Afghanistan are obvious: Insurgents exploit asymmetrical advantages of irregular warfare to offset ISAF's overwhelming superiority. The Taliban has enjoyed sanctuary and support in Pakistan because the United States cannot afford escalation there. Other constraints are self-determined and include restraining violence, avoiding civilian casualties, and respecting human rights to comply with legal, ethical, and humanitarian norms whether or not they make optimal strategic sense. The legacy of the Vietnam syndrome ensures that minimizing US casualties is an imperative; avoiding casualties drives even stricter caveats among coalition partners.

Time is a critical dimension of power, both in the negative effects of protraction and in the sense of timing embodied in the concept of the culminating point, where power begins to decline once it has reached its peak. The initial culminating point in Afghanistan came with the overthrow of the Taliban when the United States served as the arbiter of power to establish the new Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Once the government was in place, the United States required the cooperation of the Karzai regime and was unwilling to do anything that might prove destabilizing. As time unfolded, the war continued and intervention dragged on. US pressure to reform clashed with Afghan doubts about commitment and sensitivities over sovereignty. Trust was undermined. As a result, despite Afghan dependence on American and international support, dissension increased over elections, corruption, replacement of officials, civilian casualties, control over prisoners, and so forth. Caught in a commitment trap, "our leverage declined as our involvement deepened," as Komer put it about Vietnam.

### *Competing and Contradictory Aims*

Paradoxes of limited war, intervention, and irregular warfare in Afghanistan have resulted in a pervasive set of contradictions that greatly complicated the relationship of ends to means. These contradictions have remained largely unmanaged. Among the most difficult are wicked problems, which occur when efforts to attack one problem set give rise to new contradictions.

For example: the Islamic Emirate fell in a matter of weeks with relatively little effort engineered by a few dozen Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives, while ten years later over 100,000 ISAF troops and 300,000 ANSF struggled to prevail over perhaps 30,000 Taliban insurgents. Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency methods have been at odds with state-building goals and sometimes with each other when Afghans hired to mobilize manhunters



became new “warlords” or key political leaders became targets on the kill/capture list (Joint Prioritized Effects List [JPEL]). The tactical imperative of force protection separates soldiers from the people they are supposed to protect without necessarily separating insurgents from the population. Poppy eradication has supported counternarcotics goals, but feeds the insurgency by depriving Afghans of their livelihoods, thus undermining counterinsurgency. Rapidly pumping billions of dollars into development programs in one of the world’s poorest countries was a sure way to promote corruption, as was the money that flowed into trucking, fuel, and private security contracts needed to sustain ISAF. Reliance on Pakistan for counterterrorism (CT) cooperation and overland access to Afghanistan has allowed it to provide essential sanctuary and support to the Taliban without penalty. Short rotation cycles helped sustain the force for the protracted conflict. However, the United States (and ISAF) have suffered from Groundhog Day syndrome, fighting, as in Vietnam, for 12 years one year at a time.

### *Overly Ambitious Aims*

The US view of war as a transforming mission has guided intervention in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, strategy has failed for the most part to assess the distance between desire and possibility. Even when ambitions were grounded in reality, performance could never overcome the absence of a unified political-military approach or a reasonable timeframe.

Military defeat of the Taliban was never feasible for many reasons, but the primary problem was political. However necessary and reasonable it seemed to establish a competent Afghan government, the attempt to turn the country into something that was alien to its nature amounted to a gross form of mirroring by an often over-bearing patron. The prescription for “fixing” Afghanistan through combining a hypercentralized state, “democracy at the point of bayonets,” and governance programs, supplemented with expensive development projects, was based on modern liberal norms and social engineering methods largely disconnected from Afghanistan’s reality as a diverse and underdeveloped Islamic nation corroded by a generation of war.<sup>9</sup> Even if this ambitious and enormously complex project had been feasible, execution swung from handing off nation-building to COIN by coalition, followed by an intensely compressed US effort that accompanied the surge to connect people to their marginally functioning government. Despite professions of support for “whole of government,” institutional divisions limited US performance by retarding the integration of political and military strategies, even after the belated embracing of COIN in 2009.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Struggle for Strategic Sufficiency*

In Afghanistan, the U.S. military found it extremely difficult to lay down the conventional battlesword, long after it proved to be a disadvantage, and pick up the rapier of counterinsurgency (COIN). The essence of strategic sufficiency required adapting to the paradoxes of irregular

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Todd R. Greentree, “Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: US Performance and the Institutional Dimension of Strategy in Afghanistan,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3 (March 2013): 325-356.

warfare by carefully limiting the employment of force while increasing force levels, balancing enemy-centric operations with population-centric COIN, and giving priority to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) development. These measures were all essential elements of an even more important underlying strategic principle: the unity of political and military dimensions.

The problem with the full-fledged adoption of COIN in 2009 and the accompanying surge was not that it was the wrong strategy, but that it was implemented too late. Although successful in stemming the Taliban resurgence, the adjustment was, in essence, a reactive effort that attempted to compensate for strategic errors that had begun to accumulate immediately following the overthrow in late-2001.

The signal error was failure to develop the ANSF while the Taliban and al Qaeda were at their weakest. Doing so early on would have made it possible for the ANSF to maintain internal security while remaining a modest and sustainable size. Instead, ISAF focused on doing the fighting itself with aggressive SOF raiding (often conducted independently under US-UK Operation Enduring Freedom), task forces that conducted “clear and clear again” operations, and islands of armed development associated with Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Conducted as economy of force operations, the combination amounted to strategic insufficiency. The most damaging effect was GEN Stanley McChrystal’s “insurgent math” where kinetic actions, especially when they caused civilian casualties, produced more insurgents than they eliminated.

The more sophisticated approach that resulted from the realization that “you can’t kill or capture your way to victory in Afghanistan” amounted in fact to a rediscovery of the basic principles of irregular warfare and counterinsurgency. The increase in force levels made it possible to synchronize targeted enemy-centric actions with phased clear-hold-build campaigns conducted under restrictive rules of engagement, and supplemented by governance and development programs, all intended to secure and protect the population. Underlying the adaptation was the fundamental strategic principle that in war political and military dimensions are unified. Whereas in conventional war this relationship is handled, as Clausewitz put it, “at the level of cabinet,” in an internal conflict political and military interaction occurs at all levels: strategic, operational, and tactical.<sup>11</sup>

However, that adaptation came after the war had become so protracted and had suffered from multiple counter-strategic limitations raises a serious question: Is big COIN inevitably a second-best solution? It was evident from the outset that belated embracing of COIN was never going to be sustainable for the length of time it would take to have full effect. Declared by the president in 2009 to be time-bound in the face of low domestic support, the US troop surge and the programs associated with it were enormously expensive and came as other ISAF forces had already begun to withdraw. Compounding this problem, allowing a Marine Expeditionary Force to concentrate in Helmand Province reduced ISAF operational flexibility by confining a majority of surge forces to an area that contained less than three percent of the Afghan

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<sup>11</sup> For a brilliant soldier’s eye view see Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics* (London: Hurst & Co., 2012).



population and was not the insurgency's center of gravity. It was also recognized that the rapid jump in the ANSF to over 300,000 was beyond institutional and financial capacities, while the parallel governance push expected too much of the Afghan government too soon. The so-called "civilian surge" and accompanying injection of development funds were based on specious assumptions about performance and efficacy. Not only was there a failure to "break the interagency phalanx," the military remained over-dominant while civilians were never really "at war."<sup>12</sup>

It is too early to sort out the enduring effects, but the entire approach puts in mind advice from an earlier war, T. E. Lawrence's famous 27 Articles, the guide he wrote for British officers assigned to support the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Turks in World War I. Of these, the key lesson is contained in Article 15:

Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the [Afghans] do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them. Actually, also, under the very odd conditions of [Afghanistan], your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Most Important Thing About a War is How it Ends*

Afghanistan demonstrates that no matter how well you fight, the most important thing about a war is how it ends.<sup>14</sup> Yet, in Afghanistan, as in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, the United States is exiting its combat mission unilaterally without terminating the war.

Even though the United States is not withdrawing altogether from Afghanistan, the President's assertion that "the tide of war is receding" gives rise to several observations about strategy and war termination. The first is that as protraction and costs increased without demonstrable success or clear aims, the value of the object declined. As with Vietnam, a principal consequence of Afghanistan (and Iraq) for the United States will be a lack of popular and political will to risk costly and protracted military interventions that is likely to endure, perhaps for a generation. Conversely, the tide is not receding for Afghans, and in fact the outcome may well be another rise in the cycle of war that has continued in one form or another since 1979. This is also the second time around for them with the United States. After the mujahedin forced the Soviets to withdraw in 1989, the US interest in Afghanistan declined and America downgraded its investment in conflict resolution. The resulting chaos ultimately led to the rise of the Taliban.

The idea of reconciling with the Taliban occurred several years ago, even while the notional aim was to defeat it. Again, conflict resolution is a much more limited aim than victory. Prospects are further constrained when force and diplomacy are misaligned. At this stage, aside from the dubious wisdom of power-sharing with Islamic extremists, attempting to wrangle the Taliban into negotiations at the same time troops are drawing down means that leverage is slipping away. The answer to the

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12 Austin Long, *On "Other War": Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006).

13 T. E. Lawrence, "Twenty-seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin*, 20 August 1917.

14 Fred C. Iklé, *Every War Must End*, revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

problem of ending the war in Afghanistan lies irrevocably in the past and in the traditional Afghan view of victory. As soon as the Taliban were overthrown in November 2001, most of them ceased fighting and were ready to align themselves with the victors. The new Afghan government was eager to settle these fighters back into their communities. However, the United States, focused single-mindedly on hunting terrorists, overruled reconciliation in any form and by doing so failed to exploit the advantage it held at the culminating point.<sup>15</sup>

There is additional risk in opting for exit short of ending the war. Bruce Hoffman points out that as a result of the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and the permissive environment in Pakistan, “. . . Al Qaeda may well regain the breathing space and cross-border physical sanctuary needed to ensure its continued existence.”<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

The strategic lessons of Afghanistan, placed alongside those of Iraq, Vietnam, and Korea, resolve into a recurring pattern of problems and challenges that transcend the obvious differences. These lessons are attributable in differing degree to the nature of limited war, foreign military intervention, democracies at war, and irregular warfare, and all are common to US historical experience. On the assumption that Afghanistan will not be the last time intervention becomes a compelling national urgency for the United States, the premium here is on understanding and institutionalizing these lessons so they may be remembered in time.

There is a notion that a solution lies in having a unifying grand strategy. Often implied as nostalgia for the strategic coherence of the Cold War, it is just that, a notion. There may be reasons why the world would be a better place if the United States had a grand strategy. However, it is worth keeping in mind that having one focused so exclusively on containing communism offered no immediate solutions to the problems of limited war the United States encountered in Korea, while using combat troops to prevent dominoes from falling led to disaster in Vietnam. Likewise, it is not clear how a grand strategy in the high policy sense of “engagement” or “offshore balancing” would have helped guide US interventions in Afghanistan or Iraq once they were underway.

More useful than a unifying intellectual concept are workable approaches to policy, strategy, and performance that hold out the chance of improving on the historical record. There is nothing revolutionary in the practical fixes suggested below. Most of the lessons were learned in Vietnam and are being relearned today.<sup>17</sup> There have been any number of subsequent efforts at interagency fixes, notably the 1993 Presidential Decision Directive 56 (PDD-56) “Managing Complex Contingency Operations” that followed the Black Hawk debacle in Somalia. Our

15 Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*; Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

16 Bruce Hoffman, “Al Qaeda’s Uncertain Future,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (June 2013): 635-653.

17 For example, there is more than an echo of Vietnam in the recent re-embracing of the core role and mission of the Special Forces advocated among the Special Operations community. See Hy S. Rothstein, *Afghanistan and the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006) and John D. Waghelstein, “Ruminations of a Pachyderm or What I Learned in the Counter-Insurgency Business,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 5, no. 3 (June 1994): 360-378.

recent interventions have prompted a new round of analyses and reports.<sup>18</sup> Most of their recommendations point in a similar direction, where the first order of business is to get our own house in order. US institutions, with the partial exception of the Special Forces and CIA, were designed for purposes other than the complex and intractable political-military situations that prompt intervention. Adaptations that imply new legislation or major institutional reform may be beyond reach, but others are within decisionmaking grasp and a matter of leadership.

Probably the most important lesson of Afghanistan embodies the wisdom of Lawrence's Article 15 in the current desire to avoid large COIN-style intervention in favor of keeping the footprint small. As always, the problem lies not so much in recognizing what must be done, but rather in actually changing organizations and the ways they do business.

### *Fixing Policy, Strategy, and Performance*

1. Build a systematic approach to mission and contingency planning beginning with three basic criteria for making policy determinations: (1) Identify interests, (2) Decide a degree of commitment, and (3) Estimate the probability of success at different levels of cost and risk.<sup>19</sup>
2. Develop a strategic framework to establish the basis for matching means to ends: (1) Analyze the nature of the situation as the first requirement for judgment; (2) Determine aims, including definitions of political and military success; (3) Describe the desired end state and how it is to be achieved, for example, through military victory, negotiated war termination, international peacekeeping, mediated conflict resolution, or ongoing management; (4) Identify limits, distinguishing between ends and means as tools of strategy, demands of war such as avoidance of escalation, and self-determined constraints; (5) Use net assessment as a basic tool for analyzing complex political and military interactions among multiple actors at global, regional, and internal levels, further distinguishing among national, regional, and local levels; (6) Assess risks from factors such as contradictions in aims, mismatches between aims and means, separation of military and political dimensions, and consequences of underinvestment; (7) Reassess, adapt, and repeat.
3. Develop a mission or campaign plan based on the strategic framework to include: (1) All instruments of power, using a principle of strategic sufficiency such as diplomacy, development, and defense (3D), (2) Align coalition and alliance contributions, including arrangements for leadership, command, coordination, and division of labor; (3) Plan force levels, distribution, and employment; (4) Integrate political and military operational planning that gives highest priority to: (a) state-building, including accountability, institutional bureaucracy, and rule

18 Some of the best of these include: Linda Robinson, "The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces," *Council on Foreign Relations, Special Report No. 66*, April 2013; U.S. Army Special Operations Command, "ARSOF 2022," *Special Warfare* 26, no. 22 (April-June 2013); James Dubik, "Building Security Forces and Ministerial Capacity: Iraq as a Primer," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 2009; MG Michael T. Flynn, CPT Matt Pottinger, and Paul T. Batchelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan* (Center for a New American Security, January 2010).

19 This approach to policy determination was originally proposed in Graham Allison, Ernest May and Adam Yarmolinsky, "Limits to Intervention," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 2 (January 1970): 245-261.

- of law; and (b) force development (or security sector reform), including police; (5) Design supporting programs and projects; (6) Prepare to manage and mitigate the impacts of limits and risks.
4. Using the strategic framework and integrated political-military campaign plan, tailor an organizational structure to fit the specific situation and level of threat or conflict: (1) Seek unity of effort based on shared goals and maximize unity of command; (2) Establish clear civilian or military lead with designated authority determined by level of conflict and commitment; (3) Create a corresponding integrated civil-military team based on the Country Team or a Regional Command model; (4) Establish interagency structures in the field and Washington, DC, that mirror each other; (5) Strive for maximum continuity through extended assignments, repeated rotations, and maintaining stable leadership by establishing semipermanent headquarters and commands.
  5. Build a cadre of civilians who are trained, equipped, and oriented to operate as part of a civil-military team prepared for self-protection in conflict environments. Emphasize civilian capabilities and authorities to conduct political action in addition to program management and related responsibilities such as reporting and analysis.
  6. Refine doctrine and guidance, beginning for example, with a national policy study and directive, interagency guidance, and Department of Defense (DOD) joint publications, not limited to field manuals. Educate civilian and military officials from multiple organizations together and elaborate a shared civil-military doctrine. Consult the growing body of research on multiple aspects of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq, such as the contribution of development projects to COIN, the effectiveness of the surge, and operational assessments.<sup>20</sup>
  7. Make every effort to obey Article 15 by not trying to do too much. At the same time avoid doing too little. Maximize leverage, but respect the limits to power. Identify local allies and establish relationships of trust, but beware of commitment traps and the dangers of expediency. Consult widely. Spend more time listening and less time trying to dictate.

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20 Eli Berman, Jacob Shapiro, Michael Callen, and Joseph Felter, "Do Working Men Rebel? Unemployment and Insurgency in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 55, no. 4 (August 2011): 496-528; Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 7-40; and William P. Upshur, Jonathon W. Roginski, and David J. Killcullen, "Recognizing Systems in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned and New Approaches to Operational Assessments," *Prism* 3, no. 3 (June 2012): 87-104.

