

**A Comprehensive Approach to Modern Insurgency:  
Afghanistan and Beyond**

**Ambassador Eric Edelman,  
Undersecretary of Defense for Policy  
27 March 2007**

Good morning. I am pleased to be with you today and have the opportunity to discuss one of the major challenges that face our alliance.

I would like to start by recognizing and thanking John Rose and the George C. Marshall Center and our German hosts for their role in organizing this important effort to allow representatives of countries involved in the Afghanistan effort to share their perspectives. I would also note the many people in the audience who had made important personal contributions to the effort in Afghanistan. There are too many here and not enough time to cite everyone individually, but I would like to note General David Richards and my friend, Minister Hikmet Cetin; as well as Lieutenant General Dave Barno and Dick Norland.

I encourage you all to sustain the momentum that has begun here this week. Our effort to overcome ideological extremists in Afghanistan and beyond is one of the most important international security challenges of our time. We simply must get it right.

**INTRODUCTION**

Let me begin by describing the nature of the threat we face today.

Some may think that the problem in Afghanistan is a “U.S. problem” – that we are there as a response to the fact that we, the U.S., were attacked on September 11, 2001 by people working for the Al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan. Or that maybe this is a problem for the UK, since they too were attacked in 2005 by people who had links to terrorists on the Afghan/Pakistani border. But one need only look to the way in which our enemies are organizing and the statements they are making.

For example, in January, the Algerian terrorist group GSPC, known for brutal attacks throughout the 1990's, switched its name to the “Al-Qaeda Organization in the Lands of Islamic North Africa,” pledged its loyalty to Osama bin Laden, and reaffirmed that its top external target is France. GSPC is forging links with terrorists groups in Morocco, Nigeria, Mauritania, Tunisia and elsewhere. Moreover, they are actively seeking to enhance their network within Europe, which is already believed to be 800 to 900 strong.

As we all know, the four-month terrorist bombing campaign that targeted Paris and Lyon in 1995 was linked to Al Qaeda. We have also had the Bali bombings, and any number of other plots that can be traced back to the zone along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Our adversaries are networked, have global reach and are actively targeting our populations.

So, let me be perfectly clear: This is a global threat we all face. And I believe we all share the same interest in working together to meet this challenge.

Afghanistan is a vital battleground in this larger struggle.

## **AFGHANISTAN:**

Noruz is here. Many expect increased levels of violence on the part of the Taliban. Others often describe this anticipated increase in Taliban activity as a Spring Offensive. I do not like that label. It seems to imply that Taliban tactics are legitimate military actions. They are not.

We should expect the Taliban to increase the level of violence this Spring, but it will be a campaign of terror. We know when they enter a village the first thing the Taliban does is burn the school and frequently kill the schoolteacher. They send letters telling Afghan villagers to stop educating their daughters. They bomb health care clinics and police stations and specifically target police officers for assassination. The Taliban also do what they can to thwart economic reconstruction and development efforts. They will do whatever it takes to undermine the work of the international community in bringing even the rudiments of civilization to a country where 80% of the population is illiterate and which is the 5<sup>th</sup> poorest country in the world. That is the basis of their “insurgency.”

I know that some, if not many, do not care for the terms “insurgency” and “counterinsurgency.” In the last several years, we in the U.S. have taken a hard look at what is required to counter the efforts of extremists in Afghanistan and elsewhere, and have concluded that we need an approach that employs all elements of national power. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps have developed a

new manual to help us apply such an approach, and have labeled it quite simply, “Counterinsurgency.”

Some might think of counterinsurgency as a blunt military effort that focuses solely on capturing and killing high value targets, but I think a quick read of the manual, which I understand is linked to the Conference website, is enough to establish that it espouses a comprehensive, interagency approach to these problems. For those who believe a comprehensive approach is necessary, we are in violent agreement. So if I slip during the course of my remarks and say “counterinsurgency,” please just pretend that you heard “comprehensive approach.”

I do think we all agree that Afghanistan is a place where such a comprehensive approach is needed. Throughout the country, the Alliance is attempting to promote:

- the development of democratic and accountable institutions,
- the commitment to the rule of law, and
- the effective delivery of public services;
- while also simultaneously fighting to neutralize myriad spoilers, from criminals, militias, and drug-lords to violent insurgents.

The challenges we face in Afghanistan and elsewhere are daunting, but we are all learning and adapting. We can and should be learning from each other.

Great progress has been made on the ground by our civilians and our militaries, who have learned to work together and have adapted in innovative ways to meet these challenges. But for every ingenious adaptation we see in the field, we should ask ourselves – what institutional failure were they trying to overcome? What tools did we fail to provide them?

Our experience in Afghanistan reinforces the need for our nations, and our Alliance, to develop better non-military capabilities and processes for integrating civilian and military efforts.

Indeed, the Afghanistan Compact – endorsed at NATO’s Riga summit – identifies three “pillars” of activity. Only one of these three pillars (security) relies predominantly on the military. The other two (Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights; and Economic and Social Development) require expertise from the civilian side of government.

This perspective has been repeatedly reinforced by history and “classic” COIN theory derived from this experience. As British General Sir Frank Kitson warned: “the first thing that must be apparent when contemplating the sort of action which a government facing insurgency should take, is that there can be no such thing as a purely military solution because insurgency is not primarily a military activity.” French infantry officer and counterinsurgent expert, David Galula, also emphasized this theme, claiming that counterinsurgency requires an approach that is 80% political, and only 20% military.

Although military personnel in Afghanistan have been engaged in many of various non-military activities, these are not areas in which our military seeks, nor should it necessarily, take the lead. Military commanders on the ground need the expertise of the other agencies of our governments to help them get the job done. In the United States, we believe that the military component should ideally be in support of the broader civilian-led effort, in order to put a particular country on a sustainable, stable trajectory. Coordinating such a civil-military approach is a difficult task; but our history demonstrates that it can be done, and provides us with useful lessons to help us meet the irregular challenges we face today.

As we approach the task of developing unity of effort in conducting these missions, we should all look to each others' experiences for insight. Let me now discuss the way in which we in the United States, in both the military and the civilian agencies, are re-discovering and learning from our own past and from the experience of others.

## **AMERICA HAS A LONG HISTORY IN COIN**

The American scholar Max Boot's bestselling book, [The Savage Wars of Peace](#), outlines the long history of U.S. forces in what he calls "small wars," from the Barbary Wars in the early 19th century, to 20th century conflicts in the Philippines, the Caribbean and Vietnam. Indeed, for over 200 years, Americans have conducted operations we today might call "irregular war;" but somehow we have lost this historical thread and have failed to institutionalize lessons from this experience. In a recent article, "Déjà vu all over again," Bruce Hoffman of the

RAND Corporation claims that this American cycle of re-learning in counterinsurgency is unfortunate, as we repeatedly repress these memories and simply revert to basic bureaucratic instincts. We then have to relearn the same lessons over and over again. It is time to reverse that trend.

The re-discovery of the 1940 Marine Corps Small Wars Manual as well as our new Army-Marine Corps Field Manual on COIN are, in part, steps in re-capturing the existing font of historical knowledge. But we still have a long way to go.

A look at past efforts reveals many lessons and a few warnings. I would like to highlight four in particular that I think are relevant today 1) the importance of civil-military unity of effort; 2) the need to overcome bureaucratic inertia; 3) the importance of adaptation and learning; and 4) the need for cultural knowledge.

I have chosen to focus on these not only on the basis of academic study but also based on my experience in government looking at these challenges from different vantage points, including my service in the White House, the State Department, and now in the Department of Defense.

### **1. Unity of Effort:**

One of the most important lessons most of us can take from America's experience in counterinsurgency is the need for unity of effort. Our experience reveals that despite rhetoric expounding the virtues of a clear unified civil-military approach, unified government effort has repeatedly proven to be an elusive goal. Some of the same issues we struggled with in Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans in the 1990's, and in Iraq and Afghanistan today were debated as far back as 1898

between General Arthur MacArthur and his civilian counterpart in the Philippines, William H. Taft.

In Vietnam, we struggled with this as well; but eventually developed what Gen Creighton Abrams described as a “One War” approach, “with all of us on one side and the enemy on the other.” The clearest reflection of this approach was the Civil Operations and Revolutionary (later “Rural”) Development Support program, known as CORDS. CORDS managed to achieve a combined civilian and military effort by eventually developing a clear chain of command toward a single objective. Civilian contributions to CORDS included several civilian agencies working with their military partners, including among others, the Central Intelligence Agency, Agency for International Development, U.S. Information Service, and State Department. These civilian-military teams worked closely with their Vietnamese counterparts to meet the needs of the population and also develop better intelligence to identify and defeat Viet Cong.

CORDS was an instrumental element in clearing the insurgency from 93% of South Vietnam’s villages. In the end, the South Vietnamese army was defeated not by a guerrilla insurgency, but by 17 North Vietnamese divisions.

Unfortunately, because of the controversies and trauma surrounding the Vietnam War at the conclusion of this conflict, our country summarily repressed much of this experience and the lessons that might have been gleaned from it.

Many American scholars and policy-makers have begun to examine the CORDS model more closely to determine what lessons might be applicable today. I am



sure many of you in this room are doing similar analyses based on your own country's experience.

Whatever lessons we all recapture from that experience, and whatever new lessons we learn from Afghanistan today, I urge us not to repeat our American mistake of assuming that we will never do anything similar – on a larger or a smaller scale – again. We simply cannot predict - or choose – the types of challenges we will face in the future. But history makes it fairly clear that the problem of unity of effort has been a perennial one.

## **2. Bureaucratic inertia**

The second lesson I'd like to address is the need to overcome bureaucratic inertia. Bob "Blowtorch" Komer, the man who developed the CORDS concept, in a critical study for RAND in 1972 identified the dysfunctional institutional inertia that hindered the effort in Vietnam.

In "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing," Komer pointed out that in Vietnam even though many in the individual bureaucracies knew what needed to be done, and even though there were high level policies in place articulating the right strategy, individual organizations tended to revert to the tasks they were designed to conduct rather than adapting to the circumstances on the ground. They optimized for success in their respective stovepipes, but this resulted in less-than-optimal outcomes for the overall endeavor.

For example, the U.S. military, which was designed to fight the Soviet Union in conventional warfare, applied inappropriate strategies and tactics against the

Vietcong. As Komer says, “we fought the enemy our way – at horrendous cost and with tragic side effects – because we lacked the incentive and much existing capability to do otherwise.”

The French had a similar problem. According to French COIN expert, Roger Trinquier, “From one campaign to another, our commanders tried to drive the Vietminh into a classic pitched battle, the only kind we knew how to fight, in hope that our superiority in materiel would allow an easy victory.”

Even worse, when a key objective should have been to assist the host nation in developing its own capabilities, we transferred our own orientation to the Vietnamese military:

“Molding conventional Vietnamese armed forces in the ‘mirror image’ of the U.S. forces... was a natural institutional reaction,” Komer noted. “We organized, equipped, and trained the [Vietnamese] to fight American style, the only way we knew how.”

Fortunately today, thanks to the efforts of many Allies and Partners, and particularly the efforts of Gen. Bob Durbin at CSTC-A, I believe we have avoided making this mistake in Afghanistan. Working with the Afghans, we are not creating, nor have we attempted to create, a “mirror image” of our own militaries. Instead, we are helping to build forces that can fight effectively, as the ANA did last summer during Operations Medusa. We are also now shifting and intensifying our effort to develop commensurate police capabilities that will allow the Government of Afghanistan to provide greater security and other benefits to

the Afghan people. Finally, we need to remember that the ANSF that we help build must be sustained, in the long run, by the Afghan national authorities.

Komer's warning, however, is sure to be equally valid for other disciplines as well. Whether helping nations or working independently, the tendency for bureaucracies and bureaucrats to revert to their comfort zones is a real threat, and something we cannot afford as we carry out our strategy in Afghanistan. Your efforts this week, and more importantly, what you do after this week, will help ensure that the bureaucracies in which we all work are the focal points for cross-cutting, strategic solutions rather than individualized institutional roadblocks.

### **3. Need to be a “learning organization”**

One way to guard against such bureaucratic inertia is to design systems that promote institutional learning. This need to learn and adapt on the fly is another key lesson from past experience in counterinsurgency. As Bernard Fall tersely observed of the need for constant adaptation in COIN, “If it works, it is obsolete” – or it will be shortly!

So we must develop a unified, government-wide approach to contemporaneous experiential learning – the kind of organizational, bottom-up learning LTC (and PhD) John Nagl talks about in his justly celebrated book, Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife, which compares the British experience in Malaya and the U.S. experience in Vietnam. According to Nagl, a key to success in these missions is

organizational adaptability – that is, the ability to learn and adapt to the changing circumstances on the ground, faster than the enemy does.

Since the Vietnam War the U.S. military has developed remarkable systems to capture lessons learned from the field and disseminate the knowledge gained rapidly throughout the training infrastructure. These systems have enabled the U.S. personnel in Afghanistan to make steady improvements to many of their tactics, techniques, and procedures Afghanistan, such as patrolling, check points, and cordon and knock procedures.

We need to find ways to develop systematized learning across all agencies of our governments in an integrated fashion – so that as lessons are identified, the strategy is adjusted in a coherent, unified way. We also need to do this across the Alliance as well, so that successes and best practices in PRTs can be shared and replicated rapidly.

A key vehicle for this process is General Casey's COIN academy – established in Iraq last year – which provides unit leaders with the most up-to-date knowledge of what is working and what is not. NATO should think about creating a similar academy in Afghanistan for ISAF/PRTs that could help the Alliance learn and adapt contemporaneously.

Allied Command Transformation is doing great work capturing lessons learned from Alliance operations and disseminating them into NATO schoolhouses. A good example is the Joint Warfare Center in Stavanger. But I submit that to truly deliver a comprehensive approach in counterinsurgency or any other

environment, NATO must promulgate lessons learned for civilian as well as military activities.

Learning within our organizations must also take place with respect to the development of indigenous capacity. Many parts of the U.S. and allied governments are helping Afghanistan and other states develop capabilities that are key to preventing or defeating insurgencies. These efforts are focused on police, justice systems, border forces, customs, counter-narcotics, intelligence, and agriculture to name a few. All of us should be working hard – and learning – to ensure we are not only helping in the right areas, but truly helping in a way that will produce durable capabilities.

#### **4. Cultural Knowledge**

Finally, in order to succeed in stability operations, we must understand the cultures with which we are operating. This is actually much more difficult than it sounds. Truly understanding another culture requires more than speaking a language or knowing certain social customs so that we do not offend our hosts. Certainly those things are important.

But to truly have an impact, and to do more good than harm, we must understand the social power structures that informally govern societies as well as the internal motivations of the enemy and the people.

What motivates them at the individual and social level? To what extent is the conflict about religion, or economics, or ideology, as opposed to other grievances?

Our enemies understand the importance of cultural factors. Indeed, today's conflicts are catalyzed by the enemy's ability to tap into "cultural narratives" of a host population, gain their support, and grow. Our challenge is to understand this dynamic and learn to counter it. We need a better approach to human terrain mapping.

As the citizens of Afghanistan begin to build a strong new sense of "national identity" – one that trumps the appeal of violent transnational extremists – our goal is to help them achieve that vision. Our ability to assist rests on our ability to understand – at a cultural level – the factors influencing their struggle. I am told that our Dutch colleagues, for example, have recognized this and have made some progress in incorporating cultural awareness modules in their pre-deployment training curricula.

Our intelligence processes and education and training systems must adapt to the need to obtain, analyze, and disseminate cultural knowledge. And by dissemination, I mean to everyone who needs it. It does no good for one country's military or anyone else to collect information if they do not share it with their allies as well as their interagency, coalition, private, and non-governmental partners.

These four observations from history are only a start. There are surely more lessons to be learned from a careful examination of our past experience.

In the time I have left I want to move to the present and say a few words about the nature of the challenge we face today.

## **NEW STRATEGY AND TOOLS FOR THE GLOBAL INSURGENCY**

The effort to learn from the past is relevant not only to Afghanistan, but also to the global challenge we face more broadly. Although much progress has been made in crippling the leadership of the Al-Qaeda network, it would be premature to declare victory and simply come home as some have suggested.

It would also be unwise to assume that in order to defeat this enemy we will not need new tools. A number of scholars have asserted that today's terror networks have evolved. For instance, today's enemy is highly adaptive, trans-nationally connected, media-savvy, and networked. In this environment, we cannot blindly graft old methods onto new strategies. Evolution by the enemy requires that we exercise extreme care in our application of COIN principles learned from past experience.

In his recent article "Counterinsurgency Redux," David Kilcullen warns that "classical theory is necessary, but not sufficient, for contemporary counterinsurgency. Mastering it may require new mental models." I agree.

He proposes, for instance, that modern COIN may not be 80% political, as David Galula suggests, but rather 100% political due to the nature of the global media and the increased relevance of public perception and political outcomes vs. battlefield victories. Every combat action sends a political message – nearly instantaneously – in this new environment. This places increased emphasis on the integration of military and civilian operations with strategic communications. I think this observation has special force with regard to the situation in Afghanistan

where the Taliban has shown its comparative advantage in this area through its use of night letters and other mechanisms.

Strategic communications – or the ability to counter the enemy’s messages through words and deeds – has historically been a monumental challenge in counterinsurgency. Commenting on his experience in Algeria in the 1950’s, Galula asserted that “If there was a field in which we were definitely and infinitely more stupid than our opponents, it was propaganda.” I think many of us believe that statement continues to apply, perhaps with even greater force, today.

Ironically, crafting an interagency or “comprehensive” strategic communications approach for today’s threat is both enabled and complicated by new technologies in the internet age. Traditionally, our comparative advantage in warfare has been technology. Communications technology has enabled a network-centric approach to warfare that gives us greater battlefield awareness than ever before. At the high end of the conflict spectrum it has enabled us to win spectacular victories on the battlefield.

On the other hand, the enemy is also enabled by technology. At this lower end of the conflict spectrum the advantage in use of these technologies may shift to our enemies. As a global movement, Al Qaeda uses the internet as a “virtual sanctuary” where it promotes its ideological vision, raises funds, recruits and trains new members around the globe. Audrey Cronin has observed that the internet is facilitating a “cyber-enabled mass mobilization” of such enemies. According to Cronin, this “cyber-mobilization” is the 21st century version of the



French levee en masse, which revolutionized warfare in the 19th century by allowing a nation-state to raise nationally-based armies with a common sense of commitment. Today's "levee en masse" looks much different, as it is global, non-territorial, and disconnected from the nation-state. Yet it may be no less revolutionary. Our ability to understand this phenomenon and to use our own technological advantages to counter it will be a key enabler of victory in our current struggle.

In sum, today's conflicts, particularly Afghanistan, require careful consideration of our past experience and prudent application of historical lessons learned, but also adaptation. From methods of organization to fund raising and the use of media and technology, today's adaptive enemy has learned from the past and has evolved. As he learns and adapts, so must we.

## **U.S. CAPACITIES AND TOOLS**

We in the United States have some successful new tools, thanks to close interagency cooperation and support from our legislature: The Commander's Emergency Response Program, or "CERP," lets U.S. forces target funds to quickly meet the needs of the local population. Other laws allow the Department of Defense to shift resources to the State Department for urgent stabilization missions; and to more quickly train and equip partners when the need arises.

More strategic processes are also taking root. In our State Department, Ambassador Tobias is leading the transformation of foreign assistance; Ambassador Herbst is continuing the development of a new office for

Reconstruction and Stabilization. The Department of Defense is implementing roadmaps for Irregular Warfare, Strategic Communications, and Building Partnership Capacity. With leadership and vision, such efforts can provide a solid foundation for more sweeping changes to foreign and security assistance that will give us more tools for integrating our efforts and meet the challenges of global insurgency.

## **NATO CAPACITIES AND TOOLS**

These programs are a start – but all our nations, including mine, should examine what else can be done to foster “whole of government” approaches within our national capitals. Then, much more needs to be done – and can be done – to bring such capabilities together within NATO.

In Riga last Fall our Heads of State and Government explicitly recognized the multidimensional nature of the challenge and tasked NATO with developing a “comprehensive approach” to crisis management missions.

A few key elements will help NATO deliver a complete set of stabilization and reconstruction tools, including capabilities that generally reside with civilians.

**Externally** – NATO must expand its liaison, coordination, and information-sharing with other international organizations and partners, at all levels and from the earliest pre-crisis warning and planning, so we reinforce each others’ actions.

**Internally** – NATO must refocus ACT’s unique capacities, to broadcast lessons learned, doctrine and training that combine civil and military elements. Also,

NATO should consider funding mechanisms like the U.S. CERP, so it can quickly and efficiently finance projects that place local populations on a trajectory of stable and sustainable peace. Finally, NATO should expand its capacity to call upon extensive civilian contributions from Allied nations, with structures and staffing to ensure that this civilian expertise, in rebuilding infrastructure, re-establishing basic services, restarting communications, and protecting local population, must be synchronized with the security effort.

Any capacities NATO has internally should be available to share with other institutions externally.

## **CONCLUSION**

What is important to remember as we strive for the institutional changes I have described, is a sense of urgency: we still need to bring stability to Afghanistan while bullets are flying. We face a brutal and savvy enemy.

As I have described, the Taliban is systematically targeting every effort the international community has made to bring development and human security to the people of Afghanistan. We need only look as far as the Kajaki Dam project for evidence:

The Kajaki Dam is the primary provider of electricity to Southern Afghanistan and Khandahar City. Bringing the Dam to full capacity will provide electricity to millions of Afghans and will serve as a tangible and significant success for the Government of Afghanistan in providing basic services to its people. The Taliban

know this, and have actively sought to halt the repairs by attacking the project engineers.

We cannot – and will not - allow the Taliban to succeed in their campaign of terror.

Your presence here today reflects a dedication to the men and women our countries have in harm's way. This dedication will ensure the continued success of the Alliance. Together we can bring stability and the prospect of a better life to the people of Afghanistan. We will also be helping to build a more secure future for our own children.