

# **The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan: Counterinsurgency and Provincial Reconstruction Teams**

J. Max Carrier

## **Introduction**

The reports of Afghanistan's irresolvable national failure are greatly exaggerated. The fundamental diagnostic conclusion of Afghanistan today is of an insurgency inflamed by *practical grievances*—primarily ineffective and corrupt governance—and *not* an irreconcilable, conventional war of ideologies, ethnicities, or other identity differences. Similarly, the failures of the U.S.-NATO coalition have resulted primarily from insufficient resource capacity and poor tactical implementation of addressing those grievances and not from any inherent inabilities towards resolution. The conflict, then, is receptive to change.

A means for coordinating and implementing counterinsurgency and development in Afghanistan (and Iraq) since 2002 are joint units of civilian and military officers called provincial reconstruction teams. As defined by the PRT Executive Steering Committee,

PRTs are civil-military entities mandated to enable the extension of the reach and influence of the Afghan authorities.... They assist in promoting and consolidating security, stabilization, reconstruction, development, good governance, and security sector reform efforts. ... The PRTs' overarching goal is to pave the way for a gradual transition from an environment where international military forces are necessary to an environment in which Afghan national and sub-national government institutions are soundly established and fully functioning, with PRTs in turn progressively becoming unnecessary (Charter of PRT ESC, 2004).

Mainstream journalists and academics, and even the U.S. Government, frequently overlook PRTs. However, PRTs have proven successful by supplementing offensive combat operations with human and economic development at the sub-national level, in the towns and villages where Afghans live, to persuade Afghans against the Taliban and in support of the official government. The U.S. Government should expand and more fully resource PRTs to facilitate a more effective counterinsurgency and development policy.

## **“Not America’s Problem”**

PRTs are effective because they address the practical grievances that frustrate peace. Most analysts, however, mischaracterize the conflict as either primarily ideological or simply too complex to comprehend. I will explain the conflict as one of practical grievances before discussing how PRTs can address those grievances.

Modern Afghanistan begins on December 25, 1979, with the invasion of the Soviet Union, beginning a savage war of attrition over ten years, fought to a stalemate. Upon the Soviets’ withdrawal in 1989, the Afghans fought each other for power. The CIA learned that radical groups had begun establishing camps in Afghanistan for Islamic militants from across the Middle East as part of the civil war, but the U.S. focused primarily on the collapse of the Soviet Union, German reunification, and Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. As one historian recounts, “If the Afghans insisted on killing one another, it would be a shame but not America’s problem” (Crile, 2004, pp. 521-522). The CIA requested no funds for Afghanistan for FY1992 and the State Department closed its embassy in Kabul in January 1989. Congressman Charlie Wilson, a lonely advocate for assistance, memorably lamented, “we f[—]d up the endgame” (quoted in Crile, 2004, p. 523).

In 1994 and 1995, a ragged band of Islamic fundamentalists emerged from the south on Toyota Hi-Lux pickups, armed with Kalashnikovs. The Taliban were ruthless, instituting in 1996 what one scholar labeled “the strictest interpretation of Sharia law ever seen in the Muslim world” (Rashid, 2000, p. 22), epitomized in its Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which seemed always more interested in punishing vices than propagating virtues. They enforced strict dress standards, thoroughly oppressed women, and banned all entertainment—excepting occasional executions at Kabul Stadium. But the Taliban won acceptance, if reluctant and tepid, by opening roads, which lowered food prices, and their strict laws pacified a population that knew only war (Rashid, 2000, p. 35); moreover, ignored by the world and with little resources of their own, Afghans saw no alternative to the Taliban, who ruled then and now by fear and intimidation.

The Taliban’s brutality only further alienated Afghanistan from the attention of the international community. In 1996, when the

## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

Taliban welcomed a wealthy Saudi expatriate, whom the Clinton Administration had pressured Sudan to expel for financing a series of terrorist attacks, few noticed. Looking for a new home, Osama bin Laden formed an alliance with Taliban leader Mullah Omar. As a failing state, Afghanistan began attracting loose groups of aggrieved young men suffering either neglect or oppression and seeking to avenge their disposition. Most Afghans reject fundamentalism, but, as one journalist noted, “its impoverished people welcome[d] a wealthy sheikh bearing gifts” (Coll, 2004, p. 9).

Jim Woolsey, President Clinton’s first CIA Director, noted at the end of the Cold War, “Yes, we have slain a large dragon. But we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes. And in many ways, the dragon was easier to keep track of” (in Jehl, 1993). Today the U.S. must proactively confront these challenges resulting from failing states. As senior Defense official Michael McNerney reflected in 2005, “it is difficult to conceive of a U.S.-led major combat operation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that would not require a significant [stabilization and reconstruction] effort” (p. 34).

Unfortunately, prior to 2001 the U.S. Government slashed funding not only to Afghanistan but also to the agencies needed to address such conflicts. The 1990s, as many triumphantly announced, had left America atop a “unipolar” world it could variably ignore or annihilate. Each year from 1993-2001, the State Department hired fewer Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) than departures, leaving a gap that would today comprise the middle grades (Kopp and Gillespie, 2008, p. 31). The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) atrophied nearly 80%, from about 15,000 to 3,000. The U.S. Information Agency closed in 1999 and folded ineffectually into the State Department.

### **Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan**

President Bush initiated Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in October 2001, designed and implemented to “win” a war—kill the offenders, make an example of the Taliban, and leave. This was a purely counterterrorism strategy, which narrowly misdiagnoses terrorists as the problem—a strategy some likened to the game “whack-a-mole”—rather than diagnosing terrorism as a *symptom* of underlying societal and economic problems. By 2006, Afghanistan bred and attracted not only a few hundred terrorists but an insurgency

## *Insights*

of tens of thousands of disaffected Afghans. The new U.S. Army and Marine Corps Field Manual (FM 3-24) defines insurgency as “an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government...while increasing insurgency control.” Counterinsurgency, in response, “is military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken...to defeat insurgency” (2006, p. 1-1). Whereas counterterrorism seeks to inflict the greatest casualties and captures, and conventional war seeks to capture territory, counterinsurgency seeks to earn the trust and allegiance of the population, the people themselves.

The Taliban, a nationalist band of fundamentalists, is only the most prominent element of the current insurgency, which is broadly comprised of illicit trafficking groups, local tribes and clans, warlords and their militias, and corrupt government officials, all operating in temporary alliances of convenience to advance their own interests. Senior Defense advisor David Kilcullen estimates the Taliban at about 32,000-40,000 insurgents (~12% of the Afghan population). A visual of two concentric circles illustrates the Taliban structure: the inner ring of ideological devotees is approximately 8,000-10,000; the outer ring includes the remaining 22,000-32,000 fighters, whose allegiances can be temporarily won by whoever credibly provides better opportunities or intimidates with greater fear (2009b, p. 49).

To illuminate these numbers, consider a typical Afghan—say, Ashraf the farmer. Ashraf cares primarily about harvesting crops he can sell for money to feed and shelter his family. He has no particular loyalty to his own government, the Taliban, or the United States. (Kilcullen recounted meeting a defected Taliban leader from Helmand Province as representative of the larger, outer circle. “I never really was Taliban,” Mullah Salam explained, “and I’m not really government now. I always cared about my own local district and my own people, and that’s what I still care about” [2009a].)

Say, as often happens, two Talibs leave a note one night at Ashraf’s farm threatening to destroy his crops if he does not begin planting poppy—or, perhaps, begin planting roadside bombs against American convoys. They promise that if Ashraf complies, they will provide credit and poppy seeds, protect his fields, and transport his harvest to market. Ashraf, like most Afghans, hates the Taliban (whose popularity is consistently less than 10%), but he knows he has few provisions and cannot transport his harvest to markets because there

## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

are no roads. The Taliban, for all their offenses, offer Ashraf what he needs. In many important ways, then, the U.S. mission depends on Ashraf's decision to submit to the Taliban or not.

The Taliban often prevail, even against those who initially refuse, by threats. The Taliban strategy, Lt. Gen. (ret.) David Barno explained, "is [to] run out the clock" by saying, "the Americans are going to leave, the international community is going to leave"—just as the Americans did before, they add—"and we, the Taliban, are going to be here when [they] leave, and [then] you are going to have to deal with us" (2009). Admiral Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, similarly contends that the Americans lose support due to the pervasive fear of Americans abandoning them again (2009). General McChrystal labels the challenge a "crisis of confidence." A U.S. PRT veteran considered the Taliban strategy "a new form of attrition warfare—not necessarily of men and material, but of staying power" (Bebber, 2008).

The Coalition of the U.S., NATO, and the official Afghan government has struggled to convince Afghans like Ashraf to resist the Taliban and support the Coalition. Those failures, however, are largely predictable, and can be remedied fairly easily. One U.S. soldier in southern Kandahar Province explained that some Afghans cooperate with the Taliban rather than the Afghan National Army or Police because "some insurgent groups pay better than we do. It's basic economics" (Jones, 2009). Another economic indicator estimates 2003 total illicit opium income at \$4.8 billion, 60% larger than the \$2.8 billion the Coalition disbursed in foreign aid (Rubin, 2004, p. 6). And, rather than developing rural areas, the Coalition simply eradicates opium fields; because the Coalition cannot eradicate all fields, the Coalition is perceived as privileging certain farmers and punishing others, confusing and angering Afghan farmers (Anderson, 2007).

### **Provincial Reconstruction Teams: "You Can Do It, We Can Help"**

Counterinsurgency doctrine generally follows three distinct, but also complex and intertwined, phases: clear, hold, and build. "Clearing" eliminates existing organized insurgent elements present in an area, often through combat offensives. "Holding" secures the population and infrastructure of cleared areas from insurgent counteroffensives. And "building" develops political support for the

official government by empowering the government to independently provide those security and human services to its constituents.

Of the three stages of counterinsurgency, the Coalition's ultimate objective is "build", because an indigenous capacity will allow the Coalition to withdraw. Indeed, the U.S. Marine Corps' updated unofficial *Small Wars* manual emphasizes the "build" (or "stability") phase as "the decisive phase" and conventional combat as only "the shaping phase." "[I]f our political objectives can only be accomplished after a successful stability phase, then the stability phase is, de facto, the decisive phase" (Williams, 2008).

These stages, however, are tactically complex and not necessarily isolated or linearly sequential; they are mutually reliant on the others. Accordingly, the coalition must provide what may be termed "sustained, comprehensive simultaneity." That is, the coalition must implement a comprehensive approach including security sector reform (SSR); stimulating licit economic development; and enhancing the efficacy, legitimacy, and capacity of all levels of governance provisions—and all simultaneously and sustained for several years.

Some use the term "whole of government" to describe employing "the full spectrum of American power and capabilities"—sometimes described with the acronym DIME (diplomacy, information, military, and economics)—to address today's complex challenges. Miklaucic (2009) defines "whole of government" approaches as "strategies that understand the multidimensionality of threats, inventory the full range of national tools available to meet the threats, and craft action plans that generate synergy among [these] elements."

Provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs)—joint civil-military teams seeking to enhance indigenous security and governance capacity—facilitate and perform these holding and building operations at the sub-national level. One PRT veteran borrowed an old Home Depot slogan to describe PRTs' mission: "You Can Do It, We Can Help" (U.S.I.P., 2008).

Unfortunately, PRTs have not emerged as a recognizable aspect of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, even to close observers. Panelists at Washington policy institutes often rattle through observations from their recent embed with a brigade combat team, but few travel outside either Kabul or the unit's forward operating base (FOB). Reconstruction apparently does not sell headlines. Tom Ricks and Dexter Filkins, two of the finest journalists of the wars in Iraq and

## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, confessed to me that they knew little about PRTs.

But senior State, Defense, and USAID officials continually praise PRTs (see Shivers, 2007; Wilkes, 2007; Rice, 2007). USAID Administrator Henrietta Fore lauded PRTs as the “cutting edge in civilian-military operations,” even providing “a test case of those interventions that are likely to remain prominent national security challenges” (2008). By integrating disparate agencies within compounds embedded into Afghan society, PRTs permit a sustained, comprehensive, and simultaneous counterinsurgency approach.

The United States established the first PRT in December 2002 in Gardez, capital of Paktia Province in rugged eastern Afghanistan. The seven officers who arrived found no running water or electricity. In what would prove a recurring theme, they arrived also without a clearly defined mission, lacking objectives, strategies, and metrics. Colonel Jack Gill, Military Advisor to U.S. Ambassador James Dobbins from 2001-2002, explained to me in July that PRTs were “refreshing” because “we did not waste...who knows how long trying to outline specifically, ‘OK, this is a PRT, and this is the formulaic structure.’ We designed it to be flexible.” But over time PRT officials grew impatient—and ineffective—without proper guidance. Several attempts at drafting mission documents have produced soporifically vague and unhelpful guidance (see, e.g., Charter of PRT ESC, 2004).

As an early success, however, PRTs effectively provided security for the 2004 Afghan elections, validating PRTs as “eyes and ears for [those] unable to access increasing areas of the country” (Stapleton, 2007, pp. 24-25). Today 14 nations operate 26 PRTs, including 13 by the United States, in Afghanistan’s 34 provinces.

### **Fragile Progress in Regional Command-East**

Khost is a relatively small province of 4,152 km<sup>2</sup> and 487,400 residents (98.1% rural) in eastern Afghanistan. In 2007, the commander of the U.S. military combat brigade responsible for Khost began clearing and patrolling areas throughout Khost’s districts—a technique known as “ink blotting”—and establishing outposts called force protection facilities (FPFs) in each district’s capital. These FPFs, the first established in Tani District in July 2007, are physical compounds housing 20-30 soldiers, the district governor, 50-100 Afghan National Police (ANP) officers, and sometimes an Afghan National Army (ANA) detachment. The American soldiers train and

advise the ANA and ANP and can engage in defensive combat where necessary.

Commander Dave Adams (U.S. Navy), commander of U.S. PRT Khost—then comprised of 86 men and women from the U.S. Army and one Foreign Service Officer—assigned Army Civil Affairs officers and non-commissioned officers to each FPF. His PRT simultaneously helped to build schools and clinics in the districts; provided security as a force protection unit; and provided training and advising to the provincial government, the district government, the ANA and ANP, and Afghan locals. Commander Adams directed a \$22 million project “blitz” of major projects including 50 schools, 300 wells, 30 dams, and over 50 kilometers of road. Adams directed the most funds to roads to connect all, even the most dangerous, of Khost’s districts to Khost City, the provincial capital—and to then connect Khost City to Kabul (Malkasian and Meyerle, 2009, pp. 12-15; Marlowe, 2008). At the groundbreaking ceremony for the first of these roads in June 2007, Adams explained, “By providing our Afghan friends with roads, schools, and fresh drinking water, the government of Afghanistan provides hope. The enemy, they offer no hope at all” (in Weis, 2007).

Road construction is proving one of the most consequential projects for U.S. PRTs in Regional Command-East. In 2008, Dr. Seth Jones observed U.S. PRT Asadabad in Kunar Province (also RC-East) cooperate productively with the district and provincial governors, especially through engaging tribal shuras toward understanding local Afghans’ primary needs and concerns. Kunar’s economy is primarily agricultural but, without roads, transporting goods to market in such a mountainous terrain is very difficult. (Remember the Taliban provide transportation for farmers who grow opium.) In 2008, Commander Larry LeGree (U.S. Navy) began not only constructing roads but employing villagers in construction as it progressed through their respective areas, which, as Dr. Jones observed, “gave them a stake involved in planning it, stake involved in actually doing it, and stake involved in actually protecting it”—a “very useful” model, Jones concluded (2009).

Commander LeGree pays the workers a wage just above what the Taliban reportedly pay; and built the Kunar Construction Center to offer courses in plumbing, masonry, and other marketable labor. The Center targets the “at-risk population,” says Captain Steve Fritz, who oversaw the Center’s construction, defined as men aged between 18-35



## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

who might otherwise be persuaded to violence for only about six dollars per day. “There is a sense that this is more an economic fight,” Fritz added appropriately (see Smucker, 2008; AFP, 2008). The construction of 50 Khost schools in 2007 created 12,000 Afghan jobs.

During visits to Kunar in the spring of 2008, David Kilcullen observed the same positive effects as Jones of the PRT’s proactive engagement. Kilcullen (2009b, pp. 90-92) was also especially interested in building roads, which he summarized as “a framework around which to organize a full-spectrum strategy” by building governance capacity through political decisions (about the road’s location access, resources, and labor), employing local Afghans during construction of their own infrastructure, and providing infrastructure that would facilitate economic growth through shipping goods to markets.

The provincial governor fortunately provided the necessary Afghan leadership in advancing development projects. While many provincial governors focus on projects in the provincial capital, Khost provincial governor Arsah Jamal supported establishing schools in rural areas where there were never schools—real schools, not madrassas—before. In 2002, 38,000 Khost children attended school; in 2008, 210,000 attended school, including 44,000 girls. The schools sometimes lack teachers, especially for girls—most families insist that their girls be taught by female teachers, who number very few—but Kael Weston, the State Department representative at U.S. PRT Khost, explained, “[I]f they [“the guys on the street”] see that road or if they see that the schools are more or less being built, even though there’s a real problem with staffing most schools, they’ll keep the welcome mat out” (2008).

As hoped, the increased presence and engagement of U.S. PRT Khost has contributed not only to infrastructure and political and economic process but also to improved security. In 2006, suicide bombs detonated somewhere in Khost about once every week; in 2007, that number dropped to once a month, and the rate of Afghan tips regarding weapons caches and insurgent activity rose (Shanker, 2007). (As yet, nothing resembling the large, coordinated Awakening Councils that emerged in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 has emerged against the Taliban in Afghanistan.) Security has improved sufficiently for the U.S. Army to transfer security responsibilities to the ANA detachment at certain FPFs on an interim basis, and formal responsibility to the ANA at one of them (Marlowe, 2008).

## *Insights*

Two scholars at the Center for Naval Analysis confirm that increased PRT presence and expenditures are empirically linked to quantitative improvements in both security and governance. They spent four months in 2007 and 2008 at PRTs in RC-East, interviewing Americans and Afghans who worked with or for the PRTs in different provinces, and testing the relationship between PRT project expenditures and security improvements at the district level using a Spearman's Rank correlation. "We found a statistically significant relationship," they concluded, "between improvements in district security ratings and high levels of PRT spending in those districts" (Malkasian and Meyerle, 2009, pp. 14-15).

Using the same technique in Ghazni Province (another province of RC-East), they found improved local governance was positively correlated with the frequency of engagement with U.S. PRT personnel. U.S. PRT Ghazni began addressing governance in 2006, assigning mentors to key provincial officials to instill good practices—for example, competitive bidding processes and project quality-assurance evaluations. The PRT also enhanced public health capacity in Ghazni through training and mentoring of public health officials. The PRT built or refurbished clinics for most of the districts, led large workshops, and operated bimonthly village medical treatment facilities in outlying districts. Overall, Malkasian and Meyerle conclude, "the more the PRT visited a district, the more that governance improved" (pp. 21-24).

Progress in RC-East is still fragile and nuanced.<sup>1</sup> PRT projects are expensive and, as such, can be considered as effectively purchasing the temporary alliance of the locals. U.S. PRT Khost utilized an annual funding increase from \$6 million in 2003 to \$50 million for 2008. In Ghazni, project spending in 2007-2008 doubled that of 2006-2007. A more overt U.S. program in Iraq paid many of the Sunni insurgents to renounce violence, effectively incorporating the Sunni insurgency onto the American payroll and patriotically labeling the group "Sons of Iraq." That program in Iraq is a principal factor in the significant decrease in violence in Iraq since 2008; however, the "Sons of Iraq" may cease to exist about as soon as American payments cease flowing, and similarly the political cooperation of cooperative Afghan shuras

---

<sup>1</sup> N.B.: Bebber (2008) and Foust (2008) attempt to show that Khost's progress is more a temporary illusion than sustainable improvement. Each makes excellent points but is ultimately unpersuasive; their papers, though, are useful guides for further improving PRTs and their operations.

## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

may or may not continue should American funding disappear. This fear in Afghanistan—among Americans of a mission unplugged by domestic politics, and among Afghans of American abandonment to the Taliban—is legitimate and concerning.

### **Historical Comparison: The CORDS Program**

PRTs resemble, by design or not, a U.S. Government program during the Vietnam War. By 1967, more soldiers and more bombing proved ineffective. That May, a senior CIA veteran of Vietnam, Robert Komer, developed a new and singular U.S. organization, the Office of Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS), through which he coordinated and implemented all U.S. aid and development. (CORDS improved upon the Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam, which from 1961 to 1963 failed due to dramatically poor implementation.) The CORDS office was important institutionally because it integrated State, Defense, and others, which are otherwise protective of their autonomy. The Office included more than 7,000 aid officials to supervise civic and economic development programs at all Vietnamese political levels, including province, district, and village.

James Corum, a military professor and counterinsurgency theorist, reflected that the CORDS program proved remarkably effective in securing insecure areas and in facilitating both economic development and support for the government. He highlights various deficiencies, especially that the teams arrived only after the war was effectively lost, but concluded, “the results were impressive. If such a strategy had been applied early in the conflict, the Viet Cong would have had much less appeal” (p. 249).

At its height, CORDS employed 400 FSOs and 7,200 Civil Affairs soldiers in each of South Vietnam’s 44 provinces (Kopp and Gillespie, 2008, p. 19; Cruz, 2007). In June 2009, by comparison, the 13 U.S. PRTs (of 26 overall) employed only 35 civilians and 1,021 military officials—barely 14% of CORDS—among a population 40% larger and on a landmass 1000% larger than South Vietnam (DOD, 2009b, p. 87). The degraded staffing reflects doctrinal neglect. General Jack Keane, an architect of the 2007 New Way Forward in Iraq, wrote that the U.S. military was not “educated and trained to deal with an insurgency. ... After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war” (in Nagl, 2007).

## **The U.S. and NATO PRTs: Differing Approaches to Assuming Risk**

Addressing Ashraf's grievances requires working with the official government to *prove* its commitment to providing for Afghans for time enough to marginalize the insurgency to such unpopularity that it is no longer a threat. U.S. PRTs are more willing to assume risk than NATO PRTs, and, accordingly, are more successful than NATO PRTs.

U.S. PRTs are comprised of less than 100 personnel, totaling (as of June 2009) 1,021 soldiers and 35 civilians and averaging just less than three civilians per PRT—one each from State, USDA, and USAID. Comparatively, the sole British PRT, in the most dangerous province (Helmand), employs 40 soldiers and 80 civilians. The two German PRTs in the relatively stable north each employs over 300 personnel, including zero combat soldiers.

The failures of NATO PRTs illuminate the importance of assuming risk. If a PRT officer identifies two oil tankers suspected of having been hijacked by the Taliban and launches an AC-130 Hellfire missile to kill the hijackers, the missile destroys the trucks and kills the drivers. Supposing the Coalition later determines the drivers are in fact insurgents, according to conventional math there are two less insurgents. Perhaps there are fewer still if some of the remaining insurgents decide that insurgency is too dangerous to participate. But, as General McChrystal notes, there are likely far more insurgents after the strike “because each one you killed has a brother, father, son, and friends who do not necessarily think that they were killed because they were doing something wrong” (2009), and who now resent the Coalition.

The Coalition has often resorted to airstrikes rather than deploying ground convoys because some nations are restricted by domestic politics from assuming risk that might cause casualties; airstrikes from unmanned aerial vehicles piloted from outside Afghanistan simply do not risk Coalition lives. However, bomb blasts do not discriminate between enemy targets and civilians or civilian infrastructure, as do ground soldiers. Ideally, soldiers stop the trucks and confront the drivers, eventually arresting and interrogating them and recovering the trucks, thereby legitimizing the official justice system. In 2008, 25% of the 2,118 Afghan civilian fatalities resulted

## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

from Coalition airstrikes (Campbell and Shapiro, 2009, p. 5), seriously undermining Coalition credibility. This hypothetical example of a coalition airstrike on a suspected hijacking actually occurred in Kunduz Province in September 2009 on the order of a German PRT officer. Collateral damage killed about 100 civilians and inspired considerable resentment. General McChrystal, who had banned airstrikes unless Coalition soldiers are in danger, grew irate upon learning of the German airstrike.

PRTs provided a means for several pacifist NATO nations to contribute to the alliance without risking casualties and domestic political disapproval. But by refusing to assume the risk inherent in conducting ground patrols and living amongst the locals, NATO PRTs have failed to do much good; in fact, quite the opposite. The Taliban were minimally present in Kunduz in 2004 and 2006 when NATO assumed control of northern PRTs, but insurgents have since established a presence there, reflecting poorly on the NATO peacekeeping operation there even prior to the mishandled hijacking confrontation.

The U.S. military refers to risk averse units located at forward operating bases (FOBs) as “FOBbits.” One senior EU advisor further derided NATO PRTs in 2007 as a “secure ‘bed and breakfast’ for the troop contributing nations’ development and political advisers and for visiting dignitaries” (Stapleton, p. 25). PRTs must willingly assume risk, both proactively and reactively engaging with Afghans productively.

### **The Importance of Establishing PRT Outposts**

While U.S. PRTs are more proactive, they are restricted by simple demographics. PRTs operate at the provincial level, but provinces vary in size from Kapisa, bordering Kabul, which is smaller than Rhode Island, to Helmand in the south, which is 50 times larger, about the size of West Virginia. On average, each U.S. PRT is responsible for a province about the size of Massachusetts and for about one million impoverished Afghans. The province is only one level of the Afghan political system; each province is subdivided into districts and villages, but PRTs do not have enough people or other resources to visit all their province’s districts even within the same month (Johnson and Mason, 2008). This inability is so consequential because most Afghans participate politically through shuras,

traditional councils of elders representing local interests below the district level; the coalition must be able to engage shuras to affect real improvements.

PRTs were designed to extend further into the Afghan population from Kabul, and PRTs have proven a good first step in that process, but the 26 existing PRTs are, by themselves, simply insufficient. Michael McNerney, a senior Defense expert on PRTs, admitted in 2005 that establishing only 22 PRTs in the preceding four years “is a snail’s pace” (p. 44). Since 2005, the Coalition has only established four additional PRTs.

Given the deficiencies of operating at the provincial level, provinces require additional PRTs. British PRT Lashkar Gah employs 80 civilians and 40 soldiers to help secure and develop the large and volatile Helmand Province. In Helmand, especially, the number of Coalition combat soldiers (separate from the PRT) is too few to hold areas they clear; so, too, is the single PRT presence insufficient to hold and build cleared areas through political, economic, and infrastructure development programs. Other provinces, such as the stable, western province of Herat, may not receive additional outposts because resources are scarce; but, ideally, several outposts would help hold and build otherwise distant and infrequently patrolled areas against insurgent infiltration (as in Kunduz). “Even in Herat,” explained one FSO deployed there in 2003, “if you leave Herat [City] and drive ten minutes, you are back in the times of Genghis Khan. You might have a mud house with a television antenna, but drive another ten minutes and you won’t have that” (U.S.I.P, 2005). The Coalition neglects large areas at great peril, and ought to operate outside the provincial capital, as did U.S. PRT Khost through its Force Protection Facilities.

Establishing a PRT outpost in nearly every district in the south and east, totaling 200 compounds, each with 100 soldiers (a mix of combat and Civil Affairs) and a minimum of 5 civilians (at least one each from State, USDA, and USAID), would require about 20,000 additional soldiers and 1,000 civilians, manageable numbers as the U.S. withdraws from Iraq and increases recruiting of capable FSOs and Civil Affairs soldiers. (The Combined Joint Task Force should remain to execute offensive counterterrorism assaults as necessary.)

The persistent presence of the PRT as an embedded institution, significantly enhanced through outposts, allows PRTs proximity to local projects to ensure quality control; proximity to the population and provincial government to provide advice and oversight as

## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

necessary (what some officials call holding “office hours”); and proximity for understanding the unique challenges in the area, whatever they may be. In practice, as one analyst suggested, PRTs’ “embeddedness” sensitizes officials to opportunities for, as one example, designing economic value chains. Linking people through bridges and roads—connecting a grape farmer to a processor to a storage facilitator to a distributor or exporter—“would ensure that PRT efforts generate the largest effects” and benefit provincial districts beyond only the province’s capital district or village (where most PRTs are based) (Hallett, 2008).

The one inherent limitation of PRTs is that they cannot operate effectively in heavy combat environments, such as in several southern districts. PRTs cannot hold and build areas that are not cleared, and their combat detachment ought to be *defensive*, only for securing the base and escorting PRT officials. PRTs, then, are appropriate only for post-conflict stabilization—holding and building cleared areas by facilitating reconstruction and empowering indigenous security and governance capacity.

Given their role, provincial reconstruction teams ought to be renamed provincial development teams. The name influences its perception by members, as well as by NATO and Afghan partners, and should accurately reflect the mission. The term reconstruction connotes a too narrow focus on infrastructure development, and the prefix (“re-”) denotes that the infrastructure previously existed, which is frequently inaccurate. Some have suggested PRTs be renamed provincial security teams but “security” does not capture the crucial corollary to security of human and economic development. While a temporary, if persistent, security presence reinforces development, development encompasses security by building schools and the economy and thereby replacing fear and resentment with hope and opportunity. Clarifying the PRT mission by renaming them provincial development teams will reflect how successful PRTs operate.

### **The Importance of Civilians, and Their War Within**

Military theorists often characterize combat as only 20-30% of warfare. David Kilcullen (2006) has suggested that “given pervasive media presence and near-instantaneous propaganda exploitation..., counterinsurgency may now be 100% political.” Accordingly, a robust civilian presence is equally as important as military presence.

Unfortunately, the Coalition civilian presence in Afghanistan today is alarmingly low—as of June 2009, only 35 Americans deployed to the 13 U.S. PRTs (DOD, 2009b).

President Obama proposed in his March 27, 2009, strategy announcement a “substantial increase”—what the State Department originally defined as 450 civilians, and in November increased to 974 (Lew, 2009)—in “agricultural specialists and educators, engineers and lawyers [to] help the Afghan government serve its people and develop an economy...from the bottom up.” U.S. Embassy Kabul spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden later acknowledged, “We will likely need even more in 2010 and 2011” (Burns, 2009). (As of Jan. 2009, no reliable numbers reveal their deployment schedules or specific assignments.)

An increased presence ought to also include personnel from agencies that are and are not already in Afghanistan. The USDA, which is not traditionally envisioned as an expeditionary force, and its Foreign Agricultural Service demonstrate the importance of civilians: 80% of Afghans rely on agriculture for a living, not just for food, and a U.S. interagency assessment in June 2006 affirmed the USDA’s importance but lamented that it lacked Congressional funding for its programs (USAID, p. 16). With less than a dozen USDA officers in country, Mitchell Shivers, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Central Asian Affairs, considered it “hard to imagine that we could have too much [agricultural] expertise in the country” (2007), a unique statement from a Defense official.

In addition to more USAID Field Program Officers, military Civil Affairs teams, USDA officials, and FSOs (of economic, consular, management, political, and public diplomacy tracks), PRTs should also employ experts from the FBI, which operated at several PRTs in Iraq; the U.S. Treasury, which embedded officials in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s; and the Drug Enforcement Administration; all to train and advise their Afghan counterparts.

Civilians are not necessarily smarter than soldiers or officers; but, simply, the military is primarily expert in military affairs and not in agriculture, development, economics, and political development. A former UN advisor at German PRT Kunduz described the Coalition to me as “incredibly naïve about tribal politics,” suggesting civilian experts could better understand social, political, and economic data. A commander may learn, he explained, that a particular individual is a terrorist and dutifully imprison him at Bagram Air Force Base, only to



## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

later find that the “so-called credible American source” was the real terrorist and, “surprise, also the other guy’s chief drug-smuggling rival.”

The most challenging civilian role is to enhance indigenous governance at all political levels. (The military generally proves effective at training *security* forces.) Improving governance—such as by teaching a Ministry of Finance official to write a budget report, or persuading the district governor not to appoint his criminal gang members to important positions—is extraordinarily difficult. As two British scholars wonder, “How and by what process does capacity within the PRT transfer to a suitable host nation provincial structure?” (Jackson and Gordon, 2007, p. 650). Few of the experts I interviewed offered solutions.

A senior Foreign Service Officer at the Department of State, with a close working relationship with PRTs, explained in the most compelling answer that, while PRTs may be unconventional, the basic professional skills of the diplomatic craft still apply. A trained diplomat living in the area has studied the security, political, and economic climate and meets with local officials to persuade them to do what he or she, as the representative of the United States Government, wants. “It’s as simple as that,” the official explained—“a test of...the full range of diplomatic skills, both analytical and persuasive.”

Finally, as important as are soldiers and civilians individually, their joint presence results in a synergy toward improved operations. Touko Piiparinen, a political officer at Norway PRT Meymaneh in northern Faryab Province from 2005-2006, describes the joint presence of military and civilian officials—co-located physically and in unity of effort—as variously a “clash of mindsets” and a useful complement. Piiparinen recounts that the military and civilians disagreed about the purpose of disarmament. While military officers sought to collect the most number of weapons, civilians believed numbers of weapons were less important than the political reconciliation it inspired between rival warlords.

Piiparinen persuaded his team that disarmament “was not merely a military-technical issue but also involved development cooperation projects as financial incentives for the [surrender] of weapons and ammunitions...as well as public information campaigns and political negotiation processes.” He concludes, “both lines of thinking were justified and produced a discussion within the PRT command group, which was more multifaceted than one that would

have been based on only one line of reasoning” (Piiparinen, 2007). Norway PRT Meymaneh is one example of the synergy of the joint civil-military presence, a dynamic that must be enthusiastically replicated at other PRTs.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to increased civilian participation is poor management within the U.S. Government. For one, the government does not currently employ as many qualified civilians as it prefers. The State Department’s Civilian Response Corps, created in 2004, envisions 4,000 readily deployable civilians—drawing from the Departments of State, Agriculture, Commerce, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and Justice, as well as Treasury and USAID (see DOS, n.d.)—to deploy in emergencies, presumably some to PRTs. But, the Corps received funding only in late 2008 and has since employed only about 20 active members in country (Herbst, 2010).

Moreover, neither the military nor the Foreign Service much values service at PRTs. Colonel Jack Gill explained, “If Max goes out and does a bang-up job as a PRT commander in Dingbadaband, OK, great. [But] if your classmate at Hamilton College ROTC is commanding an infantry battalion” at the same rank, the classmate will likely advance because the military can easily judge command of infantry battalion as a litmus test for promotion to colonel. Meanwhile, the State Department attempted to incentivize service in Iraq and Afghanistan by rewarding volunteers with a subsequent posting in popular embassies, but that policy better attracted those who sought to go to Paris rather than those best qualified for the mission. The regulations and guidance for rewards and promotions, implicit and explicit, must value PRT service more than they do currently. Otherwise, as Colonel Gill explained in what might summarize much of the U.S. mission beyond just personnel management, “that’s self-inflicted, that’s our fault, and we can’t blame anybody else for that—not NATO, not the Afghans, that’s just us.”

Moreover, Lieutenant Matt Zeller (U.S. Army, Hamilton ‘04) notes that virtually the entire ground team in Afghanistan rotates out of theater within any given 365-day interval. Accordingly, the U.S. possesses superficial institutional memory, which means in many ways that the U.S. has not been fighting in Afghanistan for eight years but in one-year intervals for eight consecutive intervals. In practice, one PRT commander might focus for his nine-month tour on improving irrigation in a particular district but his replacement, whose new staff

## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

includes specialists in civil engineering, decide they know little about agronomy and focus instead on building storehouses and bridges for nine months; the subsequent rotation, in turn, focuses principally on security through demining and weapons collection programs. After 27 months, three PRT teams are proud of their good work, but Afghans have irrigation trenches that barely reach their fields, roads that barely traverse the next district, and a lame weapons collection program that demilitarized only those who already supported the government.

The future of the insurgency depends principally upon the Coalition's ability to support the official government in providing for its constituents. Popular support for the Taliban is less than 10%, suggesting that if only the Coalition could provide for Afghans, the Coalition could effectively marginalize the insurgency. The responsibility is ultimately upon the Afghan government; but, as Clare Lockhart, the co-founder and CEO of the Institute for State Effectiveness, cautioned me optimistically, "the U.S.-NATO Coalition could take steps that would make that outcome more rather than less likely."

### **Conclusion: Finding Purpose in the U.S. Mission in Afghanistan**

The insurgency plaguing Afghanistan exploits the practical grievances that Afghans like Ashraf live with each day. The official Afghan government, unfortunately, has proven incapable of better providing for its constituents than the insurgents. The U.S. and NATO have similarly failed the Afghans and, in fact, have exacerbated grievances through, for example, collateral damage of airstrikes and uncoordinated counternarcotics policies. But PRTs, which ought to be renamed provincial development teams and greatly expanded, have helped, especially as seen under U.S. command in RC-East. PRTs coordinate and implement the whole commitment of the U.S. Government in the hold and build phases of counterinsurgency and development, ultimately addressing those local, practical grievances.

The Coalition must develop effective, indigenous governance and security capability to ensure the official government can sustain itself and marginalize the extremists. "Getting Afghanistan right," observed Ashraf Ghani, the co-founder of the Institute for State Effectiveness and a candidate for the Afghan presidency in 2009, "is not just important for Afghanistan's sake, but for the creation of global capacity" (Ghani, 2009) to address what Jim Woolsey called the

## *Insights*

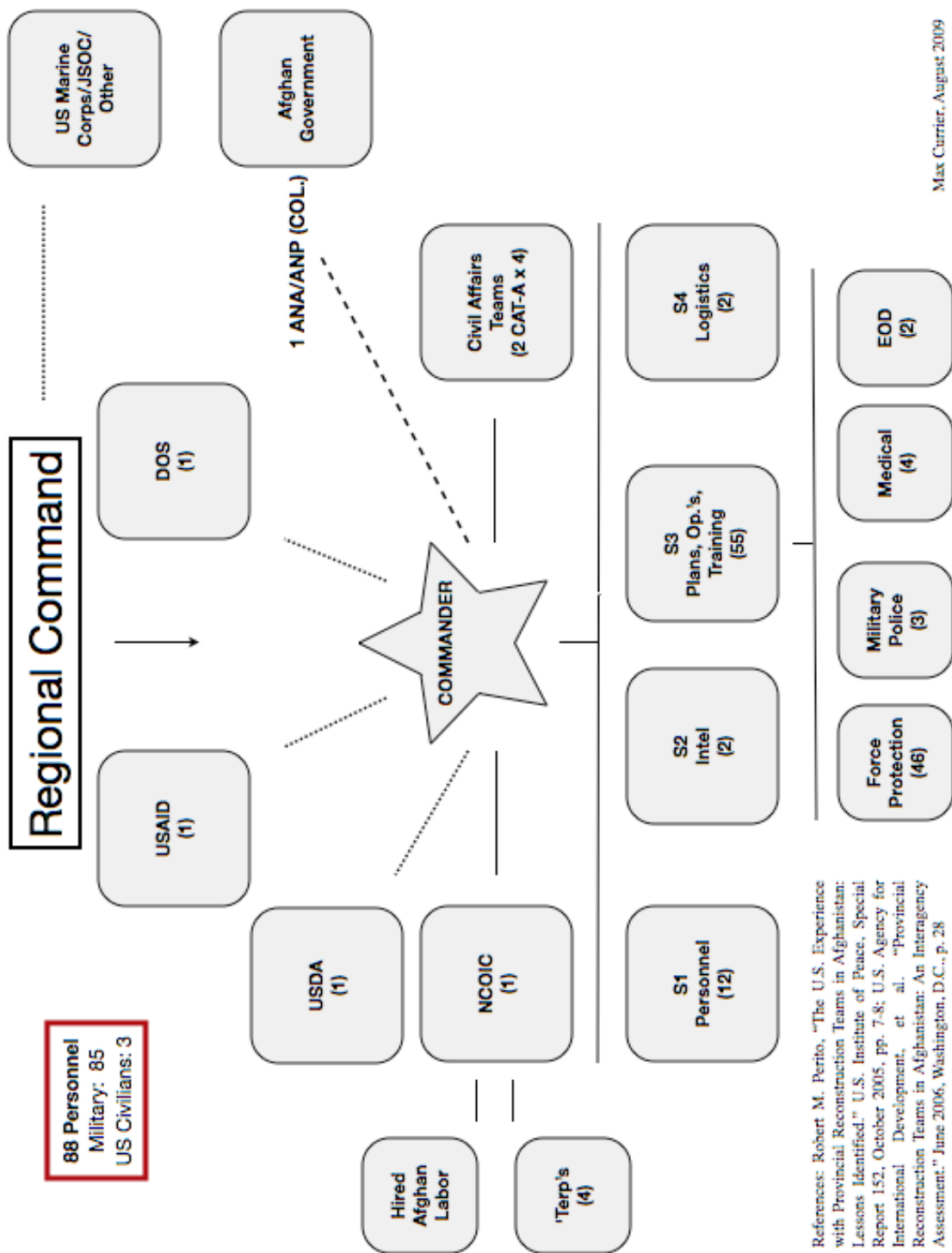
“jungle...of poisonous snakes.”

PRTs will not accomplish all that we wish them to, nor as quickly as our patience prefers, but their presence is critical to any version of success we hope to achieve. Enhancing and expanding them will provide new opportunities for Ashraf and others, for whom the Taliban was once the only option. Fortunately, the Obama Administration appears to have begun assuming this imperative. We ought to insure that they implement it effectively.

*This paper is based on my research as a 2009 summer research fellow of the Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center with the invaluable support of Ambassador (ret.) Edward S. Walker, Jr.*

*The author is available at [CurrierJM@gmail.com](mailto:CurrierJM@gmail.com).*

# The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan



References: Robert M. Perito, "The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Lessons Identified," U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report 152, October 2005, pp. 7-8; U.S. Agency for International Development, et al., "Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: An Interagency Assessment," June 2006, Washington, D.C., p. 28

## References

- Afghans learning a better way to match Taliban pay. (2008, Mar. 23). *Agence France-Presse*.
- Anderson, J. L. (2007, Jul. 9). The Taliban's opium war. *The New Yorker*.
- Barno, D. W. (2009, Aug. 27). Afghanistan after elections: Implications and strategies for moving forward. Address at Heritage Foundation: Washington, D.C.
- Bebber, R. J. (2008, Nov. 10). The role of provincial reconstruction teams in counterinsurgency operations: Khost Province, Afghanistan. *Small Wars Journal*.
- Burns, R. (2009, Aug. 31). A 'civilian surge' to Afghanistan is just starting. *Associated Press*.
- Campbell, J. H., & Shapiro, J. (2009, Aug. 18). Afghanistan index: tracking variables of reconstruction & security in post-9/11 Afghanistan. Brookings Institution: Washington, D.C.
- Charter of the Provincial Reconstruction Team Executive Steering Committee. (2004, Dec. 2, revised 29 Jan. 2009).
- Coll, S. (2004). *Ghost wars: The secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Cooper, A. (2009, Sep. 10). Live from the battle zone in Afghanistan. [Anderson Cooper 360 ¶]. Afghanistan: CNN.
- Corum, J. S. (2008). *Bad strategies: How major powers fail in counterinsurgency*. Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press.
- Crile, G. (2004). *Charlie Wilson's war: The extraordinary story of how the wildest man in Congress and a rogue CIA agent changed the history of our times*. New York: Grove Press.

## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

- Cruz, G. (2007, Sep. 5). Written testimony to the U.S. House Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. Washington, D.C.
- Ermacora, F. (1990). Cited in Johnson, C., & Leslie, J. (2004). *Afghanistan: The mirage of peace*. New York: Zed Books.
- Fore, H. (2008). Aligning 'soft' with 'hard' power. *Parameters*, Summer 2008.
- Foust, J. (2008, Sep. 22). Maybe we're not winning in Khost. Registan.net blog.
- Ghani, A. (2009, Jan. 8). Address at Session six: The way forward in Afghanistan. *Passing the baton: Foreign policy challenges and opportunities facing the new administration*. U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C.
- Global Security. (n.d.). Military: Afghanistan: Gardez.
- Hallett, M. (2008, Nov. 10). New Potentials for Provincial Reconstruction Teams. *Small Wars Journal*.
- Herbst, John E. (2010, Mar. 31). Waiting on a civilian surge in Afghanistan. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Interview with Greg Bruno.
- Jackson, M., & Gordon, S. (2007). Rewiring interventions? UK provincial reconstruction teams and 'stabilisation.' *International Peacekeeping*, 15 (5).
- Jehl, D. (1993, Feb. 3). C.I.A. Nominee Wary of Budget Cuts. *The New York Times*.
- Johnson, T. H., & Mason, M. C. (2008). All counterinsurgency is local. *The Atlantic*, October 2008.
- Jones, J. Cited in Rohde, D., & Sanger, D. E. (2007, Aug. 12). How a 'good war' in Afghanistan went bad. *The New York Times*.
- Jones, S. (2009, Apr. 2). U.S. Strategy for Afghanistan. Testimony

## *Insights*

before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia. Washington, D.C.

Kilcullen, D. (2006). Counterinsurgency redux. *Small Wars Journal*.

Kilcullen, D. (2009a, Jan. 25). Interview with Fareed Zakaria. [*Fareed Zakaria GPS*]. Washington, D.C.: CNN.

Kilcullen, D. (2009b). *The accidental guerrilla: Fighting small wars in the midst of a big one*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kopp, H. W., & Gillespie, C. A. (2008). *Career diplomacy: Life and work in the U.S. Foreign Service*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Lew, J. J. (2009, Nov. 19) Town hall with students, staff, and trainers at Camp Atterbury-Muscatatuck Center for Complex Operations, Indiana.

Malkasian, C., & Meyerle, G. (2009, Mar.). Provincial reconstruction teams: How do we know they work? The Strategic Studies Institute at the Army War College, pp. 12-15.

Marlowe, A. (2008, May 19). A counterinsurgency grows in Khost: An unheralded U.S. success in Afghanistan. *The Weekly Standard*, 013 (34).

McChrystal, S. A. (2009, Oct. 1). Address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, England.

McNerney, M. J. (2005). Stabilization and reconstruction in Afghanistan: Are PRTs a model or a muddle? *Parameters*, Winter 2005/2006.

Miklaucic, M. (2009). A More Enduring Legacy: Whole of Government Approaches to National Security Make Sense. *Armed Forces Journal*, January 2009. [online only]

Mullen, M. (2009). From the chairman: Strategic communication: Getting back to basics. *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Q4 (55).



## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

- Nagl, J. A. (2007). *The Evolution and Importance of Army/Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24. Counterinsurgency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2009). *Afghanistan Report 2009*. NATO Public Diplomacy Division.
- Obama, B. H. (2009, Mar. 27). *A new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan*. The White House, Washington, D.C.
- Petraeus, D., et al. (2006). *Counterinsurgency*. United States Army and Marine Corps Field Manual, FM 3-24 (MCWP 3-33.5).
- Piiparinen, T. (2007). A clash of mindsets? An insider's account of provincial reconstruction teams. *International Peacekeeping*, 14 (1).
- Rashid, A. (2000). *Taliban: Militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rice, C. (2007, Jan. 11). *The new way forward in Iraq*. Testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee.
- Ricks, T. E. (2009). *The gamble: General David Petraeus and the American military adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Rubin, B. (2004, Oct. 7). *The road to ruin: Afghanistan's booming opium industry*. New York: Center on International Cooperation.
- Shanker, T. (2007, Dec. 5). *Top officials greet gates in Kabul with pleas*. *The New York Times*.
- Shivers, M. (2007, Oct. 4). *Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations*. Washington, D.C.
- Smucker, P. (2008, Feb. 14). *Looking for the good guys in*

## *Insights*

Afghanistan's badlands. *U.S. News & World Report*.

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. (2009, Oct. 30). Quarterly Report to Congress.

Stapleton, B. J. (2007). A means to what end? Why PRTs are peripheral to the bigger political challenges in Afghanistan. *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 10 (1).

The World Bank. (n.d.). Afghan national solidarity program. <http://go.worldbank.org/FE0JQLDI10> (Accessed July 2009).

U.S. Agency for International Development, et al. (2006). Provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan: An interagency assessment. Washington, D.C. [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADG252.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADG252.pdf) (Accessed September 2008).

U.S. Department of Defense (2009, Jan.). Progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan: Report to Congress in accordance with the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act.

U.S. Department of Defense (2009, Jun.). Progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan: Report to Congress in accordance with the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act.

U.S. Department of State. (n.d.). Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, South Asia, Civilian Response Corps.

U.S. Institute of Peace Oral Histories Project on Stability Operations. Interview with a retired Foreign Service Officer (2005, Mar. 22).

U.S. Institute of Peace. (2008, Feb.). Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq. Washington, D.C.

U.S. Military Academy at West Point (2009, Nov. 4-7). Whole of government approaches to instability and scarcity. Sixty-first Student Conference on United States Affairs (SCUSA 61): Advancing as a Global Community. West Point, NY.

## The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan

Weis, C. (2007, Jul. 2). Roads, relationships top priority for Afghans, PRT Khost. *Navy NewsStand*.

Weston, K. (2008, Feb. 18). Address at Asia Society. Afghanistan and Pakistan: Uneasy Neighbors.

Wilkes, B. J. (2007, Oct. 4). Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations.

Williams, N., et al. (n.d.). *Small Wars II*. Cited in SWJ Editors. (2008, Jul. 6). What is a Small War? *Small Wars Journal*. [online only]