

## The Other Side of the Obama COIN

Planning a counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy is as complex or as simple as you want to make it, but the results will be dramatically divergent depending on which of these two approaches one takes. As matters stand right now, it would appear that the Obama administration has opted for a quasi-cerebral COIN plan of complex half-measures fraught with much risk and little pay-off. Compared to the successful British COIN plans for places like Kenya and Malaya, which were relatively straightforward in design and execution, the Obama plan is positively Byzantine. A popular adage would have it that “*the devil is in the details*” Given the complexity of this administration’s plan for thwarting the Taliban in Afghanistan, there is indeed a legion of devils to match such detail.

Where to begin such an examination? Well, how about with what has worked in the past? We need to pay brief homage to the wisdom of Sir Robert G.K. Thompson, grand master of successful COIN. Most scholars of modern counter-insurgency warfare will tell you that the heart of British COIN planning lay in Thompson’s five principles of counter-insurgency:

***First principle:*** The government must have a clear political aim: to establish a free, independent and united country which is politically and economically stable and viable.

***Second principle:*** The government must function in accordance with the law.

***Third principle:*** The government must have an overall plan.

***Fourth principle:*** The government must give priority to defeating political subversion, not the guerrillas.

***Fifth principle:*** In the guerrilla phase of an insurgency, a government must secure its base first.

By following these basic principles, the British created a sense of political legitimacy in the minds of the people with regard to their incumbent government. Additionally, the government created a sense of inevitability in the minds of the people. By its very nature, Thompson insisted that this ‘steam-roller approach,’ as he liked to call it, would take a long time, ten to twelve years at least, but along the way it was imperative that the people observed and believed in the following formula:

Legality + construction + results = the government

While

Illegality + destruction + promises = the insurgents.

If some readers are feeling a bit uneasy when reviewing these facts and contrasting them with the current state of affairs in Afghanistan and the Obama COIN plan – I can assure

them – within short order their unease will worsen. Thompson believed if insurgents (or the incumbent government for that matter) could knock the props out from any two of the above noted principles, then defeat of the government was likely. Let's speak plainly here. The first principle, government legitimacy, simply cannot be lived up to in Afghanistan; as we all know, the second principle, rule of law, may as well be an anti-principle when applied to Afghanistan. For example, 60% of the Afghan National Police in Helmand are fighting their own heroin addictions. In fact, rather than point out the painful reality that the incumbent government in Afghanistan cannot live up to or operate by any of those five principles, let's just move on for now. I will quickly add, however, that you can hardly blame Hamid Karzai's government for its horrors, such as warlord Rashid Dostum, which he had thrust upon him from the outset by America and her NATO allies. In other words, the very foundations of the current Kabul regime were based on what was considered expedient to prop up an 'Afghan' government that was not Taliban, regardless of whether or not it had one ounce of lasting political legitimacy.

I could heap on much more, but I will abstain other than to add that an absolutely crucial item for successful COIN campaigns is the balance of forces, the ratio of police versus soldiers. In Malaya and Kenya, the police forces were over twice the strength of their attendant military forces – internal and foreign assisting forces combined! Keep in mind here that the Obama plan will add another 30,000 US forces plus NATO forces to the Afghan mix while aspiring to build the Afghan military to nearly 400,000 men. The Afghan police forces are already badly out-numbered by military forces, and this is only going to intensify. Bluntly, this unbalanced mix will do nothing but destabilize the country further as the reader shall see.

There are many crucial aspects to this issue concerning the balance of forces, but I will give only the most important two for the sake of clarity. First, police forces know their own turf and the people within that area. They know when things are amiss whereas the army moves through in sweeps and exercises. Armies can be as caring as is possible, but in the end they are disconnected from the peoples' everyday lives. Moreover, the inevitable day must come when the army is called back to its garrison, and the local insurgents will re-emerge to ply their trade. Second, when police forces arrest criminals and crooks, they impart an illegality or an air of criminality on those whom they arrest and bring to trial. By contrast, the army imparts a definite political legitimacy to its foes. When armies fight other armies prisoners are treated, if not as legitimate POWs, at least as enemy combatants. Remember, the ultimate prize in COIN warfare is political legitimacy, i.e., the right to govern in the eyes of the people. This legitimacy can only be conferred by the people, not a foreign power or groupings of NGO's. In short, a successful game of COIN should be very much one of Cops and Robbers. As such, it is only successful when conducted like a large criminal investigation as opposed to a military operation. Think not so much of 'Rambo' but instead of 'Lt. Colombo.' This is a flatfoot's war, a boring gumshoe operation with the military kept out of sight as much as practically possible (double this, if it is a foreign military) and only called upon as an emergency 'fire-brigade.'

Okay, we now have in place a very rough sketch concerning properly executed COIN and what its goal(s) should be. Now we can do our brief compare and contrast with the Obama COIN plan. The current administration's plan is built on a swamp of misconceptions that is very unlikely to stand the test of time. Make no mistake: While the Taliban is no Marxist outfit, whether or not they know it, their insurgency is following the classic Maoist lines. They are trading space and time for victory in the long haul. As such, they could not have received a better gift than to have a deadline of sorts placed on the beginning of a US draw down of forces. If they did celebrate Christmas, they would have a lot to put under their tree in 2009. Nothing has been done to shore up the political legitimacy of the Karzai government other than to have a glaringly botched election in addition to NATO's own voice calling Karzai corrupt. Well, that really helps a lot (if you are the Taliban, that is), for political legitimacy cannot come from any foreign force, and if it can't come from Karzai -- who will garner it then? Can you say hello to the local candidate from the Taliban party? Thirty thousand more US troops will not alter this equation one iota -- indeed, it will only exacerbate the tensions that have stretched the political fabric of Afghanistan's governance to the breaking point. Moreover, even in the eyes of his own faction within the larger Pashtun community, Karzai will increasingly appear to be a puppet of the west.

The gargantuan military force proposed for Afghanistan can never be borne by the Afghan government's coffers, so the question remains: Who is going to pay for it? Moreover, such a massive armed force in such a lightly populated and underdeveloped country will only strain its social fabric further as the best and brightest-- or anybody who simply wants a job -- will flock into the army. This will completely unhinge even the remotest possibility of a productive and stable civilian society. These are all points that Thompson would be driving home with his northern Irish wrath if he were alive to advise the Obama administration. Furthermore, the additional funds that will flow into the country will have nothing but a corrupting effect as one scoundrel after the other attempts to abscond with money earmarked for training or civilian projects.

So, what do the Afghans need to make this work, if indeed it can work at all? First of all, they need fewer foreign military elements and a lot more of their own properly trained police, a force recruited from the communities who know them. They need the power of defense put back into their own hands. If ever there were a people more naturally disposed to the workings of defended or strategic hamlets, it has to be the Afghans. Many of their villages are already designed in a defensive manner; complete with rifle towers. If the Taliban find it increasingly difficult to operate with such villages, then the odds are they are going to be more willing to talk with the Karzai government than shoot at it. As of now, though, the Kabul regime has disarmed their rural populace as much as they can to assure that all monies for arms and training flow into their pockets and not to the local elders in the countryside. For obvious reasons, this, too, has played right into the hands of the Taliban. But I presume too much here, as neither the reader nor the official COIN planner in the Obama Administration is likely to know what the heck a strategic hamlet is -- thanks to the good work of the new Left, who trashed that war-winning grand tactic during the war against the Communists in South Vietnam. But if the odd Vietnam scholar does read this, do not chortle too loudly that such stratagems were dismissed as faulty by

the vaunted likes of Halberstam, et al. Communist leaders in North Vietnam later admitted the program threatened them at their very core as it was making real inroads into their ability to mount operations in the villages in South Vietnam; thus, they targeted it for a maximum drubbing in their propaganda -- and the writers, such as Halberstam, Karnow and Sheehan, et al., dutifully complied!

Let's face facts though. The Taliban are a part of the Afghan political landscape. They are not some foreign element, such as al Qaeda. They are home-grown Pashtuns who cling to a severe form of puritanical Islam. There is no point in wishing them or their Wahhabist beliefs away. Indeed, the political solution must incorporate the mullahs as they have always done; they can override even the best Afghan leader or tribal elder with a religious appeal that goes straight to the Pashtun heart. Time and again the British had to learn this lesson in their battles with these very same people on the North West Frontier over a hundred years ago.

Another problem Obama has not addressed is the lack of a single, overarching command that can co-ordinate all aspects of the battle. General McChrystal has approximately half the forces in Afghanistan under his control; the rest are 'piecemealed' out. For example, the Special Operations Command maintains control of their people; Marines in Helmand are controlled by a Marine commander; and the 160th only plays with Army Special Operations Forces (SOF). All aviation other than SOF is under an Air Force commander. The NATO units can give McChrystal the brush-off whenever they want by simply stating (quite accurately) that their respective government(s) will not permit them to operate in this assault or that exercise. Having said this, they do all work for General Petraeus (except the foreign NATO units), but the frustration that McChrystal must be experiencing has to be substantial. No matter what plan he comes up with, he doesn't really get to implement it across the board. Indeed, his task can not fail to remind one of that of Sisyphus, i.e., condemned in Hades to roll a giant boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down on him, repeating the process *ad nauseum*.

In summation, the Obama COIN plan is wholly inadequate as it fails to address the political vacuum expanding at a dangerous rate in Afghanistan. More US and NATO force at this point will do nothing but exacerbate the problem. The only chance now after so many squandered opportunities is but a slim one, namely, to tone down the whole foreign military approach. Get the military out of sight, get a properly paid and trained Afghan National Police, front and center, and get the Afghan villagers, with their elders (and, yes, even their cantankerous mullahs), into the vanguard.

Of course, there is another solution that brings peace, but that is the peace of the graveyard. This is what I call the 'Waffen SS' or 'Carthaginian' solution -- entirely unpalatable in our modern world but the one way that pure military force would succeed. Indeed, it worked for the French in Algiers, as they had won that fight militarily only to have it unraveled politically by the FLN (National Liberation Front) and the French government.

The Obama COIN plan is a half-measure, as it neither fully embraces true, workable COIN nor does it embrace a raw, sanguine, military 'Carthage' solution. General McChrystal is a bright man, a very capable COIN soldier, and he will know this current plan is irredeemably flawed. I suspect he is simply hoping to buy some time. He may not even get that, though.

One final thought. The American people really need to know that a properly constructed and executed COIN plan emulates a long-distance runner engaged in a marathon race. A 'sprinter' program is not needed. It is too expensive and it will not work. You cannot sprint over the long haul without exhausting yourself long before the finish line is reached. Politically speaking, this is precisely what has been, and still is being, attempted in Afghanistan. You can hardly blame the Taliban for celebrating the fact that the Obama Administration has recently announced they will sprint to the end of the first quarter and then re-evaluate. For the Taliban will slow down now in order to conserve their energy and carry on running to the marathon finish line, thoroughly encouraged, believing that they will be the only ones crossing it!

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